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CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE
NOVEL
4

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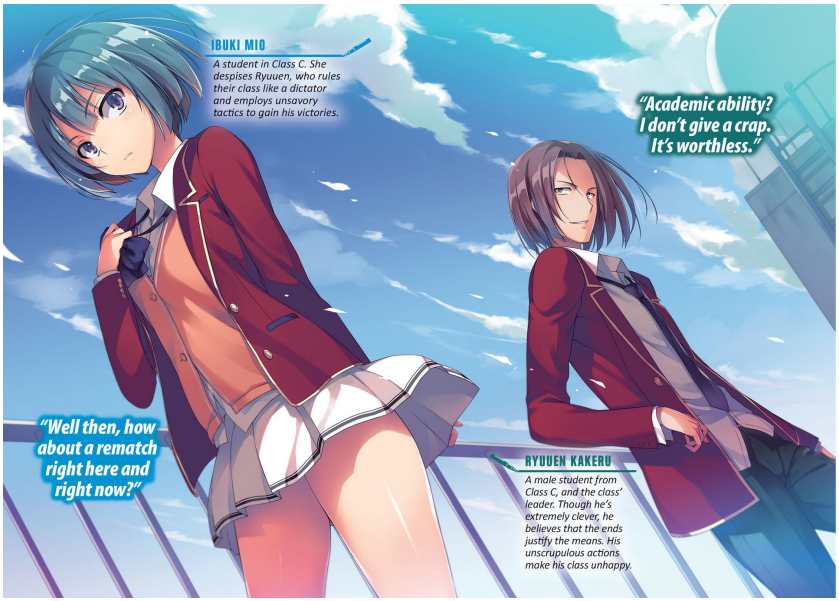
CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE
NOVEL 4


IBUKI MIO
A student in Class C. She despises Ryuuen, who rules their class like a dictator and employs unsavory tactics to gain his victories.
"Academic ability? I don't give a crap. It's worthless."
"Well then, how about a rematch right here and right now?"
RYUUEN KAKERU
A male student from Class C, and the class' leader. Though he's extremely clever, he believes that the ends justify the means. His unscrupulous actions make his class unhappy.

I don't need youth.
I don't need friends.
The most important thing
is protecting myself.
For that, I'll do whatever it takes.

"So we need to find a VIP, or something?"
"I'll win,"
Horikita answered bluntly.

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

NOVEL 4

CONTENTS

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3. AN INFINITE VARIETY OF WISHES
4. DOUBLE QUESTION
5. EACH AND EVERY DIFFERENCE

POSTSCRIPT

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

NOVEL 4

STORY BY

Syougo Kinugasa

ART BY

Tomoseshunsaku

Seven Seas Entertainment

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE VOL. 4

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Art by Tomoseshunsaku

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Chapter 1:
Karuizawa Kei's
Soliloquy

In the end, nothing changed even after I came to this school. No, that's wrong… Maybe I never had any intention of changing. For better or worse, it's always been the same for me. After all, I understand myself better than anyone else.

I know everything about myself, including my strengths and weaknesses. I know that none of the boys or girls like me. Even knowing that, I've never thought to change.

But it doesn't matter. It doesn't hurt me anymore. Because for some reason, I want them to feel that way.

As I got out of the shower, I stood and looked at myself in the mirror—completely naked, drops of water trickling down my skin. How many times had I thought about smashing the mirror to pieces? Every time I saw that old wound on my side, it was like diving back into my disgusting past.

Dizzy and nauseated, I gripped the sink and vomited.

Why did I have to have to go through such an awful experience? Why do I have to suffer like this? Why, why, why? I've asked that question for a long time now. Words don't mean anything. The past can't change. No one can change it. God is cruel. My life was destroyed because of that nightmarish day. I lost my youth, my friends, and even myself.

I have to fix that mistake. No matter how much people hate me, it'll be better than suffering like that again. I don't need youth. I don't need friends. The most important thing is protecting myself. I'll do whatever it takes. I'm a parasite, a weak creature that can't survive on its own.

ADVANCED NURTURING HIGH SCHOOL DATABASE DATE: 7/1

NAME:	Ichinose Honami
CLASS:	First Year, Class B
STUDENT ID:	S01T004620
CLUB AFFILIATIONS:	None
DATE OF BIRTH:	July 20th

EVALUATION

ACADEMIC ABILITY:	B+
INTELLIGENCE:	A
DECISION MAKING:	B
PHYSICAL ABILITY:	C
COOPERATIVENESS:	A–

COMMENTS FROM THE INTERVIEWER

As a first-year high school student, she possesses exceptional ability. We assume that her potential equals that of Class A students like Katsuragi and Sakayanagi. However, based on concerns about some long-term absences during junior high school, we have assigned her to Class B.

NOTES FROM HOMEROOM INSTRUCTOR

I trust this girl wholeheartedly. She has an honest personality and great abilities. She quickly rallied Class B when it was in disarray. I wouldn't be surprised if she made it to Class A.

Chapter 2:
The Gentle Days…

It'd been three days since the end of that special test on the island. No other exciting events had occurred aboard the luxurious cruise ship that the Advanced Nurturing High School had provided for us, and we were enjoying the respite.

It went without saying that time spent on a deserted island had caused a bunch of young, rambunctious students like us to lose our minds. We, the guys, were basically beasts—sex-starved carnivores. While we watched the girls chattering and dilly-dallying like herbivores, the boys waited for an opening like the predators that we are.

This luxurious cruise ship, equipped with everything, felt like a dream come true. This trip let us forget everything unpleasant. It wouldn't have been strange to fall in love here. Rumor had it that many couples had come together on this trip.

Unfortunately, that wouldn't happen to me. I lived a mostly solitary life.

The test hadn't changed my situation… No, that wasn't quite true. My environment had begun to change. Against my will, I'd been tasked with a major course correction. I'd originally come to this school for a certain reason.

"Contact with anyone outside is forbidden until graduation."

That rule was the reason I entered. However, a certain man had been forcibly trying to establish contact with me. Chabashira-sensei, my homeroom teacher, told me that. Then Chabashira-sensei threatened to expel me from this paradise should I refuse to work toward Class A. Although I'd done nothing scandalous, a powerless creature like me had no choice but to accept. I didn't know whether she was lying or not. Therefore, I had to assume it was the truth.

However, I didn't intend to dance to my homeroom teacher's tune forever. While I collected the necessary information, I considered that I might need to take action. A little devil perched on my shoulder whispered softly in my ear: *It's better to get them before they get you.* I wondered about the many ways I could force her to resign. Hmm.

That troubling thought lasted only a second, though. My mind returned to its normal, blank way of thinking.

"*Sigh.* If only I had the power to rotate the earth on its axis

myself…”

If I could do that, I’d be able to live freely, without having to worry about the small things. I looked out the window and daydreamed about *Dragon Ball*. Three days had passed since the end of the test. Immediately after our survival test’s conclusion, most of the students had been waiting for the other shoe to drop. They’d treaded lightly in case the school was up to something.

But there were no signs of anything malicious. All was gentle and peaceful, as if summer vacation had truly started and this was now an actual fun, pleasant trip. The students began to relax, and behaved as if the test really were over. They thought this second week was purely a vacation. Everyone became increasingly lax.

Despite our outward calm, we maintained a sense of readiness. People who know how to relax can be effective.

“Hmm? You haven’t been in the room all this time, have you?”

Hirata Yousuke, one of my cabin roommates, shook me from my reverie while I gazed at the sea. “I don’t really have any reason to go out. I don’t have anyone to hang out with, either.”

“That’s not true, though. I mean, you have Sudou-kun and the guys, and Horikita-san.”

It was certainly true that such people had categorized me as a “friend,” and I reciprocated. But those at the bottom strata of the “friends” category are treated differently from other, higher-ranked friends. When someone wants to hang out, low-level friends are only invited ten percent of the time. Naturally, I was that lowly friend.

“You might make more friends if you were a little more proactive, Ayanokouji-kun. Though I suppose it’s none of my business.”

Hirata was very popular and admired by many students. All the girls adored him, and he had a girlfriend named Karuizawa. A man with so much happiness probably couldn’t understand the pangs of loneliness.

“You’re a solid guy, Ayanokouji-kun. I think you might just need the right opportunity.”

I didn’t need such kind-hearted yet cruel words. I didn’t need to hear girls say things like, “Oh, but I’ve heard you’re great,” because if I responded with, “Well then, let’s go out,” they would reply, “Well, I don’t know about that…” I didn’t need that. *I spend time by myself because I can’t make friends or get a girlfriend. You freaking idiot.*

“I’m planning to meet up with Karuizawa-san and the others at

12:30 to have lunch. Do you want to come with? I think it'll be really fun."

"Karuizawa and others?" I asked.

"Yeah. There are about three other girls. Want to come?"

I had to think about that. To be perfectly honest, I'd wanted to interact with Karuizawa for a while now. However, there wasn't any need to hurry. Besides, if there were other girls, forget about being able to even initiate conversation. I couldn't imagine I'd be able to liven things up. In fact, I'd probably have a dampening effect.

"I'll pass. I don't think I'm on especially good terms with Karuizawa's group."

Since the end of the first semester, the relationships in our class had been firmly established. How would I go about building friendships with other people at this point? I could already picture Karuizawa and the other girls' disgust.

Even though he didn't fully understand my fear of other people, Hirata sat next to me. "I can understand that you're feeling hesitant. That's exactly why I want you to rely on me."

Hirata wore that eternal, optimistic smile of his. While it was a welcome offer, I shook my head.

"You only have about ten minutes before you have to meet them. It'd be better if you just left me here."

"There's no need to hurry. Besides, I like spending time with you."

To an outsider, my words might have sounded like an excuse, but I was honestly satisfied with the current situation. Back when I had just started school, I'd wanted to make friends. I'd wanted to be able to make a hundred friends, but naturally, everyone settled down into their own separate factions. It was only a matter of course.

Even though I'd only been able to talk with the three idiots Horikita, Kushida, and Sakura, my school life wasn't all that bad. I really believed that. But Hirata wasn't the type to leave someone be if he saw they were alone.

"Well, how about just the two of us have lunch together, you and me? Would that be okay?"

Just the two of us alone. Sitting on the bed together. Hirata turned to me with a serious look. If he lightly pushed me down, things would get out of hand. "Well, I don't particularly dislike the idea, but… Didn't you already promise Karuizawa?"

“I can eat with Karuizawa-san and the others any time, but I haven’t really had many opportunities to eat together with you, Ayanokouji-kun.”

Normally, a guy would do anything to get the chance to eat a meal with a girl. Typical male thinking. However, Hirata seemed able to prioritize eating with another guy without hesitation. It was enough to give me doubts. Perhaps he swung “that way.” Hirata was an effortless multitasker, but he never did anything without reason. “I’d feel bad if Karuizawa blamed you later, though.”

I tried to gently turn him down, but it seemed to appeal to his conscience. I wondered if Hirata considered me a trembling newborn fawn that couldn’t even take its first step. “Don’t worry. I don’t think Karuizawa-san’s the kind of girl to hold a grudge.”

No, no. Karuizawa *definitely* seemed like that kind of girl. Even though she pretended to be nice in front of Hirata, she was domineering with other ladies. I wondered if Hirata had categorized her as not being “that type of girl.” It reminded me of that teacher from *Yomawari Sensei*, who showed mercy to bad students.

“Okay. I’ll turn Karuizawa-san down for today.” Hirata pulled out his phone to call Karuizawa. I tried to stop him, but Hirata shot me a look. “Is there anything you’d like to eat?”

“I can eat just about anything, I guess. Though I’d like to avoid heavy food if possible,” I muttered.

The cruise ship had many restaurants. The offerings ranged from junk food like ramen and hamburgers to French cuisine. Since it was still daytime, I wanted to eat something light if possible. I heard Hirata flatly tell Karuizawa that he was cancelling their plans over the phone. I couldn’t hear Karuizawa’s voice clearly, but Hirata abruptly hung up.

“Are you really okay with this?” I asked.

“Of course. Well then, shall we go to the deck? If we’re just having a light meal, eating there should be easier.”

Hirata opened the door, as if to guide me, while I relaxed in bed. Hirata was being his usual concerned self, but taking me out when I wasn’t really that enthusiastic was odd. It seemed kind of forceful for Hirata, especially since he could normally read any situation well. He likely had some kind of ulterior motive.

“Thank you for helping on the deserted island. I’m sorry I didn’t thank you enough for helping to find the culprit, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“You don’t need to apologize. I wasn’t even useful. Horikita

found the underwear thief."

"Even so, I'm grateful to you for helping."

Speaking of the underwear incident, I had something I wanted to ask. I looked around to confirm we were alone, then broached the topic. "Did Karuizawa get her underwear back?" I asked.

"Yeah. When she heard Ibuki-san was the culprit, things went smoothly."

Karuizawa had her underwear stolen on the island, and for a while there'd been an uproar. Because the underwear was in a guy's bag, the relationship between the guys and girls of Class D had been in a precarious state. But Hirata put his quick thinking to use, and concealed the underwear. Because of this, things had cooled down. I was really glad. It had been an extremely delicate operation, so I was impressed. I'd half-believed that Hirata would bungle returning the underwear, despite his skills.

Hirata's quiet and peaceful resolution to the underwear fiasco proved that he was steadily climbing the stairway to adulthood. We took the ship's elevator to the deck on the top level. Many of our classmates appeared to be enjoying summer vacation to its fullest. Both guys and girls could be seen in the pool in their bathing suits, boldly frisking around. The heavy, fraught mood that weighed on us during the test had lifted.

This display of wanton indulgence came from the students' liberated desires, which had been suppressed back on the island. We didn't need to use points for any of the facilities on the ship, or for food and drinks. Everything was free of charge. No one had to restrain themselves. You needed to borrow things like swimsuits and other equipment, but that was about it. It was heaven.

By the time we reached the restaurant, over half of the seats had already been taken. We slipped past the crowd and secured two empty seats.

"Honestly, there's something I'd like your advice on." Hirata spoke in a slightly apologetic way as he looked down at the menu.

"Advice?" So he *did* have an ulterior motive, after all. That was probably why he'd wanted time to eat with me. Well, I was grateful. I didn't sweat the reason for an invitation.

"I'm not really the best person to come to for advice. Can you give me the short version?" I wasn't exactly a great talker or listener, but he had likely selected me for a reason.

"I wondered if you would act as a bridge to help reach Horikita-

san. After all, Class D will have to come together and work hard in the future, and I think Horikita-san will be indispensable."

So that's what he wanted to talk to me about, huh? When I nodded, Hirata continued with confidence.

"The other day, Class D got a major boost thanks to Horikita-san. Class morale has shot up, and more than anything else, the number of people who idolize Horikita-san has increased. This is a big opportunity."

"Well, I suppose so."

Horikita Suzune was a student in Class D, and the first friend I'd made upon starting school. I was her first friend as well, but she was a solitary, standoffish person. She was an honors student, highly accomplished both in literary and martial arts. Her weakness was her aloof, independent personality. She didn't involve herself with anyone due to her high-handed attitude, and she wasn't very good at socializing.

"That's why I think she should try and get along with everyone right now. If she cooperated with us, I think we could get up to Class C, and then B… No, we could even reach Class A."

From anyone else it would have sounded phony, but Hirata had been singing Horikita's praises since we started school. He'd been aware of her potential from the start, and didn't seem to dislike her at all. I wouldn't mind helping him out. The task was simple. I could at least bring Hirata and Horikita closer together, but that probably wouldn't lead to a permanent solution.

"But even if I can bring you both together, things won't be that easy. Horikita is difficult."

If I asked her to soften her approach, she'd turn me down. If Horikita believed I was trying to manipulate her, things could end in disaster. She would distance herself even further. Her response to Kushida's push for friendship in the café during our first semester was proof of that.

"Yes. I do understand, of course. Horikita-san only opens herself up to you, Ayanokouji-kun. I don't want to force her confidence. That's why I wanted to tell you my intentions, so that you can talk to her. Then, pretend I never spoke to you."

So I was supposed to be the Horikita whisperer, huh? I would be the go-between, delivering Hirata's opinions to Horikita. If I did that, Horikita would enter into an unseen partnership with Hirata, and never realize it.

“If I thought she’d listen to me, things would be simple enough. But it won’t be that easy. I usually just go along with whatever Horikita says. I’ve never really forced my opinion on her. If I just suddenly start voicing strong opinions, she’ll probably find it suspicious. If she finds out it’s *your* opinion, I think she’ll shut down completely.”

“But I can’t come up with anything else right now. I don’t think I have the confidence to speak with Horikita-san, let alone persuade her. This is my last resort.”

“Don’t you think it’s a little soon for last resorts?”

Hirata clearly wanted to join forces with Horikita, but he’d have to face her directly. I understood it was difficult, but so was coordinating groups of people. Horikita would probably agree. No one else in our class cherished friendship and community the way Hirata did.

I was still uncertain about his proposal. It seemed like he’d lost his nerve and was doubting himself. Hirata had also been acting strangely back on the island. This wasn’t a trivial matter.

I ordered a light sandwich and a drink. Students swam in the pool nearby, and others were eating while still wearing their bathing suits. Everyone appeared to be having fun. If Ike and Yamauchi were here, they probably would’ve foregone the food and feasted their eyes on the girls instead. Hirata didn’t pay any attention to the girls at all, but focused squarely on me.

“Yeah, you may be right. Like you said, Ayanokouji-kun. My plan was really short-sighted.”

He recognized his error in judgment and gave an honest, flexible response. Another of Hirata’s many charms. But his desire to work together with Horikita was so strong, he showed no signs of giving up.

“I should probably reconsider how to do this. Horikita-san seems very fastidious and hypercritical. How do you manage to get along with her, Ayanokouji-kun?”

Hirata wanted to become Horikita’s friend before establishing a working relationship. I thought facing her directly was the right thing to do. It was constructive, and I wanted to lend a hand, but…

“Well, in truth, I don’t think I’m on especially good terms with Horikita. Recently, I wondered if we could even be called friends.”

“But it does seem like Horikita-san gets along well with you alone, Ayanokouji-kun. You’re special to her.”

Special, huh? Hard to believe that someone with over forty

friends would say that to someone barely acquainted with one person. Or perhaps it was because he was able to get along with over forty people that Hirata felt frustrated at missing a connection with one particular student.

"There's no need to get impatient, right? The first semester's only just ended."

Bonds between people must fundamentally strengthen over time. Sometimes, you can place people together under sudden, harsh conditions, like the test on the island, and watch those bonds strengthen overnight. Of course, while you might see instant improvement via that method, those bonds can often be fragile.

"Horikita isn't the type to make friends easily." I wanted Hirata to understand.

"That's probably true." Hirata appeared slightly remorseful. Perhaps he felt like he was rushing things again. "I wasn't thinking about her feelings. I was just thinking of myself." Hirata shook himself from his reverie. Again, he smiled. "Sorry. I invited you out to eat and made it all about me. Well, let's eat, shall we?"

With that, we started eating our recently-arrived food. However, Hirata looked up and seemed to notice someone approaching us. He shot me a nonplussed look.

"Ah, so you're here after all, Hirata-kun. Let's eat lunch together!" Karuizawa approached us, leading a group of girls. She sounded happy and carefree.

"Um… Karuizawa-san, I thought I canceled our plans…"

Hirata stumbled over his words, looking unsure. Meanwhile, Karuizawa and the girls pulled out the chairs from another table, pushed me away, and circled Hirata. Our lunch went from peaceful to noisy in seconds flat. I wasn't much of a talker, but I wasn't really concerned.

I was used to dealing with situations like this. It was probably time for me to use the special skill I'd acquired since school began, my "Speedy Escape." I grabbed my food and got up quietly, without making a sound. Hirata's eyes met mine for a moment, but the girls closed ranks and he disappeared.

Maybe this was one of the select disadvantages of having so many friends. With so much time devoted to others, you didn't really get any time for yourself. Even if Hirata had issues weighing him down, he couldn't talk about them with Karuizawa and the others. Instead, he held them unspoken in his heart.

2.1

After Karuizawa monopolized Hirata, I decided to return to my room. I didn't have anyone else to hang out with or talk to, anyway. I took the stairs rather than the elevator, and returned to my room on the third deck. When I got there, I noticed some wet blotches scattered about the hallway floor. The blotches appeared to head toward my room. When I followed the trail, I discovered an elegant man striding through the corridor, nude from the waist up, wearing nothing but a bathing suit.

"S-sir! Please don't walk through the hallway while you're still dripping wet!"

A young bellhop hurried toward the man, apparently eager to control this emergency situation. The bellhop was already holding out a towel, overly prepared, like he always walked around with a strategic towel ready.

"Ha ha ha! It appears you've found me, eh?" the man said.

"Yes, I've found you. This is the fourth time. I've already told you, please dry yourself off after you leave the pool. If you don't, you'll disturb the other passengers."

Apparently, this man was a repeat offender. That explained the bellhop's prepared towels.

"Disturb? But I've no memory of disturbing anyone. I don't dry myself off with a towel on principle ever since reaching the age of reason. Haven't I already said? 'A fine man, dripping with water,' hmm?"

Yes. The man was Kouenji. He slicked back his wet hair, scattering droplets of water. The bellhop hurriedly used the towel to dry the spots on the carpet and wall. Kouenji stopped. I wondered if he found the bellhop's flustered behavior amusing.

"Do you have a pen and paper on hand?" he asked.

"Huh? A, uh, oh…due to the nature of my job, I do walk around with a notepad and pen, but…" The bellhop, clearly unsure where the conversation was headed, fearfully took out a ballpoint pen.

"Did you know that a prominent celebrity's signature can accrue an unexpectedly premium value over time? Abroad, some autographs are valued in the millions to even the tens of millions."

"And…what of it?"

After Kouenji finished scribbling something on the notepad, he

thrust it back at the bellhop. It was far away, but I was able to make out the name “Kouenji Rokusuke.”

“Wh-what is this?”

“Isn’t it obvious? A signature. Even though it’s written on such a cheap notepad, it will certainly hold tremendous value in the future. I’m presenting this to you as a token for your troubles. Please receive it gratefully and safeguard it.”

Apparently Kouenji believed the bellhop would receive this with gratitude, or perhaps a sense of awe-inspired devotion. But no one in their right mind would want this. If anything, his ballpoint pen and notepad were worth more.

“Please don’t look so suspicious. I am the man who will carry Japan’s future on his back. At that point, I intend to vacation upon a larger ship, but I’m prepared to wait until then. Of course, it will be a luxury liner of significantly higher quality than the common ship upon which we are now riding.”

Well, a luxury liner was still a luxury liner. Personally, I’d be satisfied as long as it wasn’t fated to sink like the *Titanic*. Kouenji guffawed, seemingly satisfied. The bellhop, completely dumbstruck, continued staring at the wet spots on the floor. He had completely lost the will to keep trying to stop this man.

Kouenji was alone all the time because our classmates steered clear of him, disgusted by his incredibly selfish personality. Many of our classmates had already experienced the same treatment as this poor bellhop. Hirata would probably try to speak with him, but he’d most likely be brushed off as well. Kouenji was like poison. Anyone who encountered him, friend or foe, suffered for it.

In order to avoid being dragged into something so bothersome, I slunk past the two of them. Getting too near a person of *such* high rank would be dangerous.

“Oh ho? Why, if it isn’t little Ayanokouji, hmm? What a coincidence.”

Ugh. Kouenji called my name. There was no way he was *actually* calling me, right? The instant the bellhop noticed that Kouenji’s attention had shifted over to me, he appeared elated. *I’m finally free!* is what his look seemed to say.

No, no. How could a crew member act like that? He ought to continue serving the customer, no matter how annoying the customer was. It was like someone releasing their pet into the river without permission. Especially if that fish was a ferocious, invasive species like Kouenji, which would devour all the native fish in the river until there

was nothing left.

"Do you want something from me?" I asked.

"No, no, I've no real business with you. I've simply acknowledged you because we are schoolmates. Also, though we are certainly not alike in terms of position, you are my roommate."

Kouenji flipped his hair once again, scattering more water, which splashed my face and uniform. Of course, he didn't seem to have the faintest clue what he was doing to his victims. Despite what was happening to me, the bellhop watched this tragedy unfold with a grin. *Oh yes, yes, I sympathize with the pain you're feeling…not,* he seemed to say.

"Well, I will excuse myself. Please do take care in the future."

The bellhop delivered that parting shot as he made his escape, having fulfilled the bare minimum for his role. Of course, I didn't exactly want to end up alone with Kouenji, either.

"What were you talking with Kouenji about?" I asked.

For an instant, the bellhop's expression changed to a look of anger, but when Kouenji turned around, the young man's smile returned. He was like Asuraman or something.

"Oh, um. Well, as you can see, he was wet. I tried to offer him a towel, and—"

"So, in other words, you were giving him a warning. I must have interrupted you, so I'll be on my way and let you get down to business."

I passed the ball, if you will, a blazing fastball that crushed the bellhop and gave me a chance to escape.

"This bellhop came to give *me* a *warning*?" Kouenji cried.

"Ah, no. Well, that is to say…"

I managed to escape from Kouenji and headed back toward my room. "But I'll just bump into Kouenji again there, won't I?" I murmured.

My room would become less of a sanctuary and more of a hell. I'd been alone with Kouenji several times during our trip, and every experience was unbelievably uncomfortable. Wanting to avoid such an awkward atmosphere, I turned around. I wouldn't return to my room just yet. I'd head back to where Hirata and Yukimura, my other roommates, would be.

A map of the ship was on a nearby signboard, and pretty easy to understand. The fact that the map had been placed in a gilded frame

might've been overkill, but also made it seem like something you'd find on a luxury liner. I drew a route that'd let me kill a bunch of free time, and immediately hopped onto the elevator. I got off on the second deck.

The ship had nine decks in total, plus a roof. The fifth deck was above ground, while the fourth deck was below. The first deck housed both the lounge and banquet area, while the rooftop had the pool, café, and other facilities. The third and fourth decks were for guest rooms. The guys were on the third deck; the girls on the fourth.

The guys and girls, teachers included, were neatly divided. However, there weren't any special restrictions on our movements, so a guy could easily wander through the girls' area. We were probably prohibited from staying on the girls' level or coming into the area after midnight, though.

The ship also had various kinds of entertainment options, such as movies and a live theater venue. These were everywhere, from the first underground level up to the third underground level. On the fourth underground level—the lowest level at the bottom of the ship—was some kind of switchboard breaker room. That particular level was irrelevant to the students.

The lounge was open twenty-four hours a day. We were free to go there no matter how late it was, but a notice from the school urged us to refrain from going there as much as possible. As I walked through the second-level area, I noticed that the atmosphere felt quite different. The rooms were vacant, and I couldn't tell what they were used for. So few students were in the hallways that it appeared deserted.

Just then, my cell phone vibrated in my pocket. Pulling it out, I saw that I'd received an email. A certain girl was calling me. It was convenient, since I'd planned on killing time anyway. With no reason to reject her, I took the call with pleasure.

2.2

"Ahh. Ahhh… Ahhh…"

Sakura, who'd sent me the email, was making several anxious, pained sighs.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Wah! A-Ayanokouji-kun?!"

I didn't think I'd spoken in an especially harsh or shocking way, but Sakura was so surprised that she looked like she'd been jolted with electricity. Her normally hunched posture straightened at once.

"Sorry for scaring you."

"N-no, no. I'm just kind of strangely nervous is all."

If she was *that* nervous about meeting a friend, her daily life must be a drag.

"Ayanokouji-kun, you're roommates with Hirata-kun, Kouenji-kun, and Yukimura-kun. Right?"

"My roommates? Yeah, you're right. What about them?" I wasn't expecting her to ask that.

"Oh. Well, to tell you the truth, I…I'm a little worried about the people I'm sharing a room with."

It sounded like she didn't really have a good relationship with her roommates. Sakura wasn't good at socializing, anyway. One look at her deeply troubled expression, and I understood.

"You're worried because even though you want to get along with them, you don't think you can?"

"I'm not sure. I have mixed feelings. I *do* want to get along with them, but I also want to be alone, too. I'm just hopeless, aren't I?"

Her voice trailed off and she shied away. I didn't know who else was sharing Sakura's room, so I couldn't really offer any advice. "By the way, who're you rooming with?"

"Oh. Didn't I tell you? Shinohara-san, Ichihashi-san, and Maezono-san."

She looked incredibly depressed while giving me the names. Those were all girls with strong personalities. Shinohara had a close relationship with Karuizawa; Karuizawa was like her boss, really. She was a reliable, trustworthy girl who didn't run away from a challenge, even quarreling with the boys. But she could be rather relentless

against people she didn't like. I couldn't imagine she thought much of Sakura, so she probably wouldn't go out of her way to befriend her.

Ichihashi was usually rather mature, but also headstrong. I didn't really know much about Maezono, but I had a bad impression of her. She had a bad attitude and seemed quick to pick a fight. She was probably the hardest type of person for Sakura to deal with. Even if Sakura tried her hardest to bridge the gap between them, if Maezono didn't like Sakura's attitude, she'd probably hate her. I wanted to pat Sakura on the head and tell her how great she was. I mean, she hadn't cried until now. She was doing great.

"But why come to me?" I asked.

"I…just thought any advice from you, Ayanokouji-kun, would be good?" Sakura muttered quietly.

Apparently she'd come to unexpectedly rely on me. She murmured some words of apology.

"I-I'm sorry to just come to you for help like this out of the blue. You're so busy, Ayanokouji-kun."

"It's no big deal. I don't mind it when you come to me for advice. Whether I'll be of much help is another story."

Since I wasn't really friends with any of Sakura's roommates, I couldn't guarantee I'd be able to help. While I was thinking of something I could do, a door opened.

"Huh? Ayanokouji-kun and Sakura-san? What are you doing here?"

Kushida Kikyou from Class D exited the room. Sakura's bright expression immediately disappeared, like the sun hiding behind the clouds. The atmosphere around us became uncomfortable. Perhaps Sakura wasn't good at controlling her emotions, either. Sakura's response to Kushida's bright and cheery appearance was one of rejection, but Kushida continued talking without showing any signs that she noticed.

"Ah, did I interrupt? I didn't mean to. I was supposed to meet up with some friends."

"I'm going back to my room." Sakura retreated as fast as her legs would carry her, as if trying to withdraw from Kushida in a panic.

"Oh. I'm sorry. I guess that was bad timing. I probably shouldn't have said anything."

Kushida clasped her hands together in apology. There wasn't really any reason for her to apologize, though. Sakura was just bad at dealing with people.

“Oh, that reminds me, I feel like this is the first time we’ve talked since getting back to the ship. I *did* see you hanging out with a bunch of girls earlier, from a distance.”

Kushida was the most popular person in Class D—no, probably in the whole school. On the day of the school entrance ceremony, she’d declared that she would make friends with everyone, and had almost accomplished that goal now. She was only missing a select few, like Sakura-san.

“I’ve made plans to go see some girls from Class C today. Do you want to come, Ayanokouji-kun?”

“Eh. Is it okay for me to join?”

“Huh? You’ll come?”

This was shaping up to be a bad day. Kushida’s mask had slipped a little, and her true self seemed puzzled by my response. Well, there was always the diplomatic, socially acceptable way of putting things. In other words, I had to find a polite, diplomatic way to refuse.

“I’m joking. Don’t you know by now that I’m not the sort of person who joins in on stuff?”

“Oh jeez, come on. You surprised me a little. Ayanokouji-kun, you’re funny.”

“R-really?” Deep down, I doubted she truly found me funny, but I was scared to hear Kushida’s real thoughts.

“Well, I’ll be going.”

As she bid me goodbye, both our cell phones started ringing at the same time. There was a loud, dinging sound that meant we’d received a message from the school. Usually it was a message with new instructions to follow, or some kind of modification to an event. Your phone would make a sound even if you had it on silent. Clearly, it was a message of high importance.

“What is it?” Kushida asked.

She stopped in her tracks and looked puzzled, which was understandable. Even though they’d explained this system to us after school started, we hadn’t received any important messages during our summer vacation until now. Simultaneously, an announcement could be heard throughout the ship.

“Attention. This is an announcement to all students. All students should have received a message from the school, as indicated in the contact line. Please check your individual mobile devices and follow the instructions accordingly. In the event that you did not receive a message, we apologize for the inconvenience. Please go to the nearest

faculty member for assistance. Because the contents of the message are extremely important, please do not miss it. We repeat—"

"That was about the message we just got, right?" Kushida asked.

"Probably."

I pulled out my phone and saw the following message:

A special test will begin soon. Place gather in the designated room at the designated time. Anyone who arrives later than ten minutes after start time may be penalized. Please gather in Room 204 on the second deck by 18:00 today. Because it takes about twenty minutes to reach the area, we ask that you please use the restrooms now if necessary. Either silence your phone or turn it off, and make your way over.

"A special test?"

This probably wasn't going to be a paper test or physical fitness examination, or something you'd see at a regular school—much like the survival test on the island. However, nothing in the message implied what awaited us. Were we supposed to be able to read into something, or should we just be prepared for anything? I didn't know.

More than anything else, certain points in the message weighed on me. They wanted us to gather in the room at 18:00, but we only had about twenty minutes to get ready and head over, which was an extremely short amount of time. Plus, it seemed like it had been decided rather quickly. Also, why was the designated meeting spot one of the ship's private rooms? That couldn't make a good exam room by any standard.

"Can you show me your phone for a second?" I asked.

Kushida, without hesitation, showed me that she'd received the same message. The only difference was the designated time and place. In her message, the designated time was set at 20:40, but she was also told that it took about twenty minutes to reach the area. I also noticed that her designated room was just two rooms down from mine.

"I wonder why they called us in such a strange way?"

"I have no idea."

I only knew that I had a bad feeling about this. I hadn't thought that our cruise would end like this. A place where all the first-year students would gather inside the ship… I'd already visited places like movie theaters, party venues, and buffets. I thought I could speculate about the contents of the test based on any suspicious activity I saw, but I'd seen no indication of anything of the sort. Why would they isolate students, limit us, and then tell us to start…whatever this test was?

I quickly messaged Horikita via chat on my phone. I saw that she had read the message immediately after I sent it, which was unusual. She'd often wait about half a day before reading and replying; several days in some cases. Was it because we'd received a message from the school around the same time? I tried asking her questions.

Did you get a message from the school just now? I typed.

Yeah. I did.

My designated meeting time is 18:00. What about yours?

Mine says 20:40. That seems like a pretty big difference.

20:40, huh?

The same time as Kushida. So were they going to separate the guys and girls? That was all I could guess at present. They *did* tell me that the start time for the test was at 18:00, after all.

I'm curious about the difference in start times. That might be unfair—some people will get more time to prepare than others.

We can't know anything for sure at this point.

We chatted more about the school's message. Horikita's replies were instant.

There are several things that I'm still curious about, but we don't really have the time. We'll just have to show up to the meeting spot. Because your time is earlier, I look forward to hearing your report.

Understood.

After I sent that short reply, she stopped responding. She had apparently shut her phone off already.

"Ayanokouji-kun?"

Kushida, as if interested in my chat with Horikita, drew nearer to me. I considered talking to Kushida about my conversation with Horikita, but didn't want to be a bother to her. I decided to wait and see how things progressed. It shouldn't be long, anyway.

2.3

I walked to the second deck, just as the message had instructed. I arrived at my destination about five minutes before the designated time. There were several students wandering the normally deserted level. I saw some people I couldn't identify enter a nearby room. It was more than one or two people. They came up to the designated deck and disappeared into the other rooms.

"Are those students from another class?" I wondered.

At first, I thought about waiting in front of the entrance, but things might have already gotten started inside. More than anything else, I didn't want other students to see me, so I decided to act. A reply came immediately after I knocked.

"Enter."

I stepped into the room. The homeroom teacher for Class A, Mashima-sensei, wearing a well-tailored suit, sat before me in a chair. My eyes lowered to a small table on which some materials waited. Two male students sat before Mashima-sensei as well. Both were my classmates from Class D.

"So, one of the remaining two spots belongs to Ayanokouji-dono, I see! Most agreeable!"

It was Sotomura who uttered that strange, nerdy greeting. People affectionately referred to him as "The Professor." An overweight first-year high school student with glasses, he fit the stereotypical image of a male otaku perfectly. He was very knowledgeable about history and machinery, though much of his speech, his actual words, and his inflection all came off as unintelligible. Despite that, he was somehow able to communicate with others.

"This *is* rather odd, isn't it? Ayanokouji?"

Yukimura, another of my roommates on the ship, sat next to the Professor. The Professor and Yukimura. Normally, you wouldn't find the two of them together. I wondered why they were here. What had we gotten ourselves into?

"What are you doing? Hurry and take a seat." Mashima-sensei spoke without looking at me. I silently took a seat next to Yukimura. One vacant seat beside me piqued my interest. At first glance, I guessed that we had been put into groups of one teacher and four students, but…why such small groups? Maybe the as-of-yet-unseen fourth student would shed light on the situation.

“We are still waiting on one more. Please sit quietly.”

I got the feeling that this definitely wasn’t a trivial matter. There was a storm coming, the curtain rising on a new test. A powerful omen. No matter what we might have expected, it was obvious that this test would be something entirely different.

Ordinarily, it would be normal for everyone to receive the test’s rules at the same time to ensure fairness. Whether it was a written exam at our desks or survival on an uninhabited island, that was the norm. But here we were, in a private, enclosed space. Why did they want us in small groups? Was I was worrying too much and too early?

No matter how much I agonized over it, I probably wouldn’t find any answers by myself. I sat down in the chair. None of us spoke. Although we hadn’t yet passed the appointed time, I really wanted the mystery person to hurry up and get here. There was a clock in the shape of a music box, a common feature in every room on this ship. Silence hung heavy all around us. Before long, it would be 18:00.

Mashima-sensei glanced at the clock only once, calm as you like. Simultaneously, someone knocked at the door. Mashima-sensei told that person to enter, and the door slowly opened.

“Pardon the intrusion!”

With that, Karuizawa entered the room. I’d expected our fourth person would be from Class D, but I hadn’t expected Karuizawa. I’d thought another guy would be joining us. This was completely unexpected.

“Huh? What’s going on? Why are Yukimura-kun and these other guys here?” she asked.

My thoughts exactly. I couldn’t hide my bewilderment over being included in this bizarre gathering. The Professor didn’t seem to worry, but Yukimura looked puzzled.

“I believe you were told punctuality was key, and yet you’re late. Hurry and take your seat,” Mashima-sensei said.

“O*kay*.”

Karuizawa’s response indicated that she wasn’t thrilled to be here and didn’t much care what the teacher thought. She sat down and, after studying the three of us, lifted the chair and moved it a little further away from me. I felt somewhat depressed that she wanted to get away from me.

“Sotomura, Yukimura, Ayanokouji, and Karuizawa, from Class D. Without further ado, I will now explain the special test.”

Good; at least we were getting an explanation after all. However,

the reasoning behind selecting this group of four was still a mystery. We were in a private room, too. I had a bad feeling about this.

"W-wait a minute. I don't understand. What do you mean, *explain* a test? The test was already over, right? Also, what's the deal with these guys? This is really weird."

Karuizawa, unable to listen to anyone else talk, immediately barraged Mashima-sensei with questions. I wondered if she'd even read the message properly.

"I will not answer any questions at this time. Be quiet and listen." Sure enough, Mashima-sensei looked coldly at Karuizawa.

"Jeez, all right. Fine, I'll shut up."

Mashima-sensei had a reputation of being rather cold to his students. Even now, he seemed aloof during a simple explanation. My own homeroom teacher, Chabashira-sensei, was also indifferent, cold, and didn't provide any support to her students. Like her, Mashima-sensei didn't seem like the kind of teacher who would provide a shoulder for Class A students to cry on. The only definite difference between the teachers was that in comparison to Chabashira-sensei, who seemed unmotivated and unnaturally uncooperative, Mashima-sensei was impossible to read. I wondered if he kept everyone at a certain fixed distance, no matter who they were.

"In this special test, all the first-year students will be divided into twelve groups based on the signs of the Zodiac. Everyone will participate within their respective group. The purpose of this examination is to test your thinking."

Twelve groups based on the signs of the Zodiac? That meant Class D was divided into three groups, and those three groups would represent three of the twelve signs. Apparently this would test our "thinking." They wanted to test our ability to think, and to process information thoroughly. Was that it?

"What do you mean by 'test our thinking'?" Karuizawa, unable to stay silent, reflexively spoke up with another question.

"I've already told you. I will not be answering any questions."

After Mashima-sensei's second warning, Karuizawa seemed to feel the gravity of our situation. Although she looked blatantly unhappy, she shut her mouth and listened. I didn't know how seriously Yukimura and the Professor took all this, but they remained silent.

"Society needs three fundamental qualities in order to progress: action, thinking, and teamwork. Those with the necessary qualities

will become wonderful adults. The previous exam on the uninhabited island focused heavily on testing your teamwork. However, we shall now test your thinking in four ways: your ability to thoroughly process information, which is an essential component of this test. Your ability to analyze your current situation and clarify the task at hand. The ability to solve the problem after you've clarified the process and identified the task. The ability to utilize your imagination, and the ability to create new values. Those are the qualities you'll need."

Although his explanation was rather concise, several question marks were still hanging over everyone's heads after his brief explanation. I was no better. I still didn't understand anything at all.

"As I've said, in this test we have divided you all into twelve groups."

Finally, the words that Karuizawa had longed to hear arrived.

"Are there any questions thus far?"

"I don't get what any of this means. Can you explain it in a way that's easier to understand? I mean, okay, I understand that we're being divided into twelve groups, but why am *I* together with *these* guys? What about Hirata-kun? Or the other girls? And I still don't get what we're doing. Tell me. Come on, please?"

Even though she attempted politeness at the end, I get the feeling she didn't mean it. However, Karuizawa was right to have doubts. Even though Mashima-sensei said that he was taking questions, the explanation was ambiguous at best. We still didn't know what commonality there was between the people gathered here.

If each class was divided into three groups, there should have been twelve to fifteen Class D people gathered here for the explanation, but they hadn't done that. Was it due to the size constraint of the rooms? No, this ship had several rooms that could host a modest-sized gathering. There had to be a reason they'd purposefully sub-divided us.

"You four gathered here will be in the same group. At this very moment, students in other rooms are receiving the same explanation you are."

Wait, so we *were* members of the same group? In other words, the four of us were allies…

"If that's true, then wouldn't it be way faster and easier if you just gathered all of our classmates together in one place and explained? Also, what's the reason for putting me with *these* three? Why? These guys gross me out. Why am I on a team together with *boys*? Honestly, I hate it…though being with Hirata-kun would be

fine."

Karuizawa continued blabbing until Yukimura finally seemed to lose patience.

"How about you shut up and try listening? The test is probably going to start soon. If they dock our points because you keep blabbing, are you gonna take responsibility? Even back on the deserted island, you dragged us all down. Can you try not to cause any more problems?"

"Huh? When and how exactly did I cause problems? You're pissing me off."

I'd seen guys and girls quarreling with each other many times in the previous test. The Professor and I stayed quiet.

"Calm down, you two. Yukimura, your concerns are groundless. The test hasn't yet begun, so you won't be affected. Besides, your attitude has no bearing on this test."

"*See*? Now you get it, right?"

Karuizawa looked smugly at Yukimura. Yukimura glared in frustration. I should've stayed quiet, but I had to say something.

"Karuizawa, if you don't change your attitude toward the teachers, it might leave a mark on your permanent record. That wouldn't be good, right?"

"Hmph."

Yukimura snorted derisively, mocking Karuizawa without saying a word. Mashima-sensei seemed to develop a headache while watching a fight that would be more appropriate between elementary school students. He lightly tapped his finger to his forehead.

"Listen. Your group assignments are a done deal. You cannot change them. To gain a good result on the test, you must get along."

"Ugh, jeez! This sucks! I can't deal with these three! Hirata-kun would have been *so* much better!"

"Heh. But you know, three heads are better than one. Thus, if the three of us join together, we might be able to surpass the good Hirata-dono, my dear lady," the Professor said.

"Gross. Even if there were a hundred or two hundred of you, you still wouldn't be worth a single hair on Hirata-kun's head."

I tried not to care, but hearing her say that kind of thing depressed me. Karuizawa clung close to Hirata day and night, except for whenever she was with her girlfriends. It's true that we really weren't fit substitutes for Hirata, but…

“Ugh. Well, at any rate, I’ll just report it to Hirata-kun later.” Karuizawa let out a frustrated sigh, then averted her eyes again. Trying to work with her was going to be a hassle, but the same was probably true for Yukimura.

“Finished? Please let me continue my explanation.”

“Okay, okay. I understand that we’re being divided into these groups, but why is it only the four of us getting this explanation? I thought you’d explain things after our entire group was gathered together. If this is some scheme against us, or some kind of harassment, then I want you to knock it off.”

Karuizawa kept talking without pause, as if intending to be disagreeable to the very end. Mashima-sensei remained expressionless.

“It would appear that you cannot help but be concerned by this small gathering. Therefore, I will try to provide an answer. This is neither a conspiracy against the students, nor is it harassment. It’s rather simple. The groups don’t consist of members from just one class; they are made up of about three to five individuals collected from each class. If we didn’t explain things in advance, we would run the risk of confusion.”

That was why only a few people were gathered into each room. The other three still didn’t seem to understand. They fell silent again, as if they were going over what Mashima-sensei had said in their heads. Of course, I couldn’t immediately digest it, either. We were so quiet that we could hear the clock ticking.

“W-wait a minute. What do you mean? I still don’t get it at all. We’re going to be grouped with students from other classes? Isn’t that crazy, though? Aren’t the other classes supposed to be the enemy?”

“That’s right, Sensei. We’ve been competing against the other classes up until now. Now we’re supposed to ignore all of that and just suddenly team up with them?”

I understood Karuizawa and Yukimura’s point, but the school decided the rules.

“You’ve been competing until now? Your school lives have only just begun. You shouldn’t run around like a chicken with its head cut off this early, Yukimura.”

“I… P-pardon me.”

“Right now, you shouldn’t spend your energy on trying to understand this test. Rather, focus on how to think. Your group assignment is ‘Rabbit’. Here is a list of the members. You will be required to return this list when you leave the room. If you feel it’s

necessary, I would recommend trying to memorize it now."

He passed over a postcard-sized piece of paper. On it were listed fourteen names of people in our group. As Mashima-sensei had told us, apart from us four, all the others were from Classes A, B, and C.

Although Mashima-sensei had said we were in the Rabbit group, the group name was written in Japanese, placed in parentheses next to the Chinese reading. That made it easier to read, and thus easier to distinguish who was in our group.

CLASS A: Takemoto Shigeru, Machida Kouji, Morishige Takurou

CLASS B: Ichinose Honami, Hamaguchi Tetsuya, Beppu Ryouta

CLASS C: Ibuki Mio, Manabe Shiho, Yabu Nanami, Yamashita Saki

CLASS D: Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, Karuizawa Kei, Sotomura Hideo, Yukimura Teruhiko

I know some of the students on the list. Ichinose from Class B; Ibuki from Class C. Apparently, we were teammates now. At this point, I couldn't really imagine what this exam was going to be. Was it even possible for us to compete alongside other classes, like Karuizawa and Yukimura had said? I quickly glanced out the corner of my eye at Karuizawa. She looked a little perplexed. Being placed into the same group as Ibuki was a perverse kind of fate.

"Don't worry. I will answer any questions you have. I believe you will be able to understand everything afterward. Probably."

He tacked on the "probably" because he likely doubted that Karuizawa was going to listen. Understandable. Mashima-sensei then explained this baffling group's formation.

"The point of this test is to ignore the prior fraught relationships between Classes A through D. If you do, you'll have a shortcut."

"Ignore the fraught relationships? What do you mean?"

"Karuizawa, please. I'm begging you, shut up and listen. I can't concentrate when you prattle on," Yukimura begged, completely exasperated.

"From this point on, you are no longer acting as members of Class D, but rather as members of the Rabbit group. Whether you pass or fail this test depends on each group."

I was understanding more and more, little by little, but still couldn't see the bigger picture.

"There are four possible outcomes that can be achieved in this

special test. No exceptions. We have also prepared handouts with the grade items so that you may better understand them. However, you are prohibited from taking these handouts, taking photographs of them, or anything or the sort. You should verify the contents here and now."

Some slightly crumpled-up sheets of paper had been prepared for the four of us. Most likely, the students who were here before us had already looked at them. The basic rules were written as follows:

AN EXPLANATION OF THE SUMMER GROUP SPECIAL EXAMINATION

This assignment centers on a "VIP" assigned to each group. By providing answers to the school via a defined method, you will earn one of four outcomes.

At 8:00 a.m. on the first day of the test, each student will simultaneously receive a message informing you that we have chosen someone to be the "VIP" in your group.

The test begins tomorrow and ends at 9:00 p.m. on the fourth day. (You are completely free to do as you wish for the first day.)

Each group should gather twice during the day at a predetermined time in a predetermined room to talk for one hour, so that they may discuss matters with only their group.

The contents of each group's discussion shall be left to the discretion of the group itself.

After the test has concluded, the school will only accept answers during the period between 9:30 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. on that final night. During that time, each group must submit their answer regarding who they think the "VIP" is. Each individual may only submit an answer once, but only the first answer received from any member of a group will decide the test result for that group.

Answers must be sent only to an email address that we shall provide to each group, and only by using your mobile devices.

The twelve VIPs cannot submit answers.

You may only submit an answer for the group to which you are assigned.

Test results will be sent to all students via email at 11:00 p.m. on the final day.

A list of fundamental rules was written on the paper. More

detailed descriptions of the rules and a list of prohibited items were also on the sheet, among other things. The terms were stricter than the rules for the test on the uninhabited island, with many more precautions. After the rules, I saw the four potential "outcomes":

OUTCOME #1: *If the answer submitted by the group after 9:30 p.m. on the final day is correct, then everyone in the group will receive private points, including those of the VIP's classmates who belong to the group.*

OUTCOME #2: *If a group fails to submit an answer between 9:30 p.m. and 10 p.m. on the final day, or if someone from the group other than the VIP and their classmates submits an incorrect answer, then the VIP will be awarded 500,000 private points.*

These seemed like rather eccentric rules. Since we hadn't received any deeper explanation, the mechanisms of the test seemed unclear. The Professor and Karuizawa cocked their heads over and over, as if wracking their brains. Mashima-sensei, seeing their reaction, gave us a supplementary explanation in his flat, unchanging tone.

"This exam has one critical element. Understand it, and this test will not pose a problem. The key element is the existence of the VIP. There is only one VIP in the group. In this test, you're after the name of the VIP. It's that simple. For example, Yukimura, let's say that you were chosen as VIP. The correct answer for the Rabbit group would be 'Yukimura.' That answer would be shared with all members of your group. Then, after the test concludes at 9:00 p.m. at the end of the third day, the school would accept answer submissions only between 9:30 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. During that time, each member of your group should enter the name 'Yukimura' in a message and email it to the school. Your group would pass, and we would confirm that you've met Outcome #1, and thus every member of your group would be awarded 500,000 points. In addition, as a reward for leading their group to achieving Outcome #1, the VIP would receive double that amount—1,000,000 points."

"O-one million?! Whoa."

"Wait, everyone receives 500,000 points? And if you're the VIP, you get *double*?"

That was such a heinous amount of points to receive that anyone, regardless of their regular class, would want it. Also, since the VIP would receive twice that amount, he or she would become so wealthy that they would jump straight to the top of the class,

regardless of grade.

"Now then, as for Outcome #2… In the event that the VIP's identity is not discovered before the end of the examination, and no one in your group found out the identity of the VIP or some even attempted to *lie* about the identity, then only the VIP will be awarded points, just as it says. He or she will receive 500,000 points."

Wait, was this even a valid test? Outcomes #1 and #2 were largely the same. In either case, the VIP would receive a large amount of points. There was no benefit to Outcome #2, unless you wanted to prevent other classes from getting points.

"Jeez, everyone's gonna be jealous of the VIP! Not being picked for it would be unfair! No matter what happens, that person still gets points! And if we get Outcome #1, it's a million points!"

Karuizawa seemed like she wanted to be chosen as the VIP. That was natural, though. The VIP received special treatment. Was that the advantage of being the VIP? However, so far we'd heard only two of four outcomes. There might yet be some tricks that hadn't been revealed.

"Sensei, what about Outcomes #3 and #4? We don't understand the conditions for those yet."

"Did you understand the explanation for the first two? If you do not, then we cannot continue."

"Of course, we understand. Please continue."

After a short pause, Mashima-sensei went on.

"Regarding the remaining outcomes, they are written on the reverse side of the handout. However, please wait a bit before turning the paper over."

We had instinctively reached over to flip the paper, but stopped once we heard that. As we began to grasp the rules of this exam little by little, Mashima-sensei stared at us with sharp eyes. It seemed like the exam had already begun.

"Ah, wait a minute. I'm not following you at all."

Although Mashima-sensei had given us a rather simple explanation, Karuizawa had only been half-listening, so she didn't completely understand. Her problem wasn't that she scored poorly on tests like Sudou or Ike. Since she refused to listen, her comprehension was abnormally bad.

"Very well, I will explain in simpler terms. Have you played the game *Werewolf*?"

"*Werewolf?* Oh, that game's been popular for a while, right? Yeah, yeah, I've played it. It's pretty interesting," she said.

I couldn't help but be slightly bewildered, and my reaction showed.

"Wait a second. Ayanokouji-kun, don't tell me you don't know about *Werewolf?* Whoa, I can't believe it."

She could be amazed all she wanted, but I hadn't heard of it. Besides, it was probably a lot more fun playing games with friends than playing by yourself. That happy state was way beyond my reach, though.

Karuizawa seemed to realize this, and appeared sad. "I'm sorry. It's just, like, not having friends must be so sad."

She crossed her arms and began to explain the game.

"Well, you get together with your friends, and then you divide people up as either villagers or wolves. The one who survives at the end is the winner. Get it?"

No, I didn't get it at all!

So, what, I could be king of the wolves or something? Mashima-sensei, unable to leave it at that, began to explain the details of the game a little more thoroughly.

Werewolf was invented by an American as a sort of party game. There is no limit on the number of players you can have, but you need the minimum in order to play. There are several roles that players can adopt, including "villager" and "wolf." There seemed to be various other roles, but the important thing was whether the villagers or wolves survived. The wolves were supposedly dressed up like people and pretending to be villagers.

The game has two time periods. During the day, everyone gets together and talks, including the wolves that are pretending to be villagers. The players who are suspected of being wolves are executed. When nighttime falls, the wolves prey upon one villager. Those phases repeat, and the number of players continues to fall. Then, when enough players have been taken out, it's decided which side was victorious and which was defeated. That was the simple breakdown.

However, why was it necessary to use this *Werewolf* game as an example? If we considered the rules that we'd received thus far, then the wolves and people should just cooperate and aim for Outcome #1.

"Although I said that there is only one VIP in the group, if the VIP is exposed right away, then Outcomes #3 and #4 will appear."

"And that's…on the other side of the handout, right? Is it okay if

we turn it over?" Karuizawa asked.

Mashima-sensei nodded. We flipped the paper over.

The remaining two outcomes were written on it. For those two outcomes alone, answers would be accepted at any time during the test, or during the 30 minutes after the test had ended, just like with the other rules. Should you make a mistake in either timeframe, you would incur a penalty.

OUTCOME #3: *This outcome is triggered when someone other than the VIP gives the correct answer to the school without waiting until 9:30 p.m. on the final day of the exam. That student's class will gain fifty class points, and the person who submitted the correct answer will earn 500,000 private points. Also, the VIP's class will lose fifty class points as a penalty. At that point, the group's testing period will come to an end. However, if one of the VIP's classmates is the person who submits the correct answer, this answer will not be counted and the test will continue.*

OUTCOME #4: *This outcome is triggered when someone other than the VIP gives an incorrect answer without waiting until 9:30 p.m. on the final day of the exam. That student's class will lose fifty class points. The VIP will earn 500,000 private points, and the VIP's class will earn fifty class points. The testing period will end for the group that submitted the incorrect answer. However, if one of the VIP's classmates is the person who submits the incorrect answer, this answer will not be counted and the test will continue.*

The remaining two outcomes made it much easier to see the big picture. If we were limited to only Outcomes #1 and #2, there was no problem if the VIP shared their identity with everyone. Even if you made a mistake, there was no penalty. However, with the addition of these "traitor" rules, the test was suddenly flipped on its head. Should the VIP carelessly out themselves, traitors would prey upon them.

Since the school would accept answers any time during the test, no one would seriously aim for Outcome #1. Everyone would take actions that would garner points. If the VIP wanted to trick the other classes and secure their own victory, they could come up with a scheme to make it look like another person was the VIP. Your reward would be reduced, but you'd also be penalizing the other classes.

"The school will take anonymity into account during this test. At the end, only the outcomes for each group and the increase or decrease in points for each class will be announced. In other words, we will not announce the names of the VIPs or those who submitted answers. Also, if you wish, you may have a temporary ID assigned to

you, to which you can transfer points. It is also possible to divide points up and receive them that way. If you yourself remain quiet, there should be no fear of discovery after the test. Of course, if it's not necessary for you to hide your identity, you may receive your points openly. That is perfectly fine."

They'd been thorough; finding the VIP in this text was going to be extremely difficult. If you wanted to earn a lot of money just for yourself and didn't tell your classmates the truth about the VIP, you could feed everyone a steady diet of lies. For instance, if Yukimura were the VIP, I could theoretically mislead the students from the other classes and make them believe that the Professor or Karuizawa was the VIP.

This test would become dramatically difficult if there were VIPs in our class. In such a case, you'd have to undergo rigorous probing and deceive others.

"Outcomes #3 and #4 are very different from the first two. That's why they are listed on the reverse side of the sheet. With that, the explanation is complete."

"Umm, umm. I kind of get it, but I kind of don't."

"Heh, I must confess that I myself am somewhat confused."

"You two are idiots. I'll explain it later, so don't keep bothering Mashima-sensei." Yukimura, who seemed like he wanted to cozy up to school officials, shot Karuizawa down quickly.

It sounded somewhat close to the Werewolf game, but only somewhat. True, the wolves had some advantages, but the villagers were also granted the power over life and death. They could shoot their targets dead. However, if the villagers were deceived, they might start to kill each other. I tried to simplify the rules in my head.

First, the testing period lasted three days. Compared to the test on the island, this was rather short. The school had divided up all first-year students in certain ways, and then made twelve groups based on the Zodiac. Each group contained a mixture of students from various classes, but within the group, you functioned as allies. Although the number of people varied slightly, each group had roughly fourteen people. In each group, one student was assigned the "VIP" role.

The VIP was free to tell others, "I'm the VIP, my name is the answer." In such a case, winning was a sure thing. Of course, the test was structured in such a way that the if the VIP *weren't* discovered, the rest of the students couldn't answer correctly. Of course, it was possible to take a shot in the dark and guess correctly after narrowing

down the list, but the penalties for guessing incorrectly were huge.

Punishments here carried the same level of severity as on the island. I tried to neatly summarize tangible methods for clearing the test.

The VIP shares his or her identity with the entire group, and we all clear the exam.

Someone else tries to answer at the end, but they incorrectly guess the name of our VIP. We win.

The traitor finds the VIP.

The traitor is misled about the VIP's identity.

Four possibilities. Unfortunately, each of the four results yielded vastly different amounts of points. The first option, "The VIP shares his or her identity with the entire group, and we all clear the exam," required that we wait for the test to end, and then have everyone submit the correct answer. In that case, the reward would be incredible. The VIP would earn one million points, and everyone else would earn 500,000 points. But it would be highly difficult to get such an outcome.

Some groups might have an advantage due to the varying number of people on each team. It was highly possible that someone might betray the others if they knew the answer. Most people would want to earn a reward, and would betray others before they themselves were betrayed. Real harmony would be difficult to come by.

Regarding the next option: "Someone else tries to answer at the end, but they incorrectly guess the name of our VIP." That would happen if we failed to discover the VIP's identity even after searching within our group. This might very well happen. Many students didn't like taking risks, and if they weren't sure of the answer, they'd become a traitor. It'd be difficult for everyone to answer correctly, and easy for the VIP to conceal themself.

If the VIP remained quiet, people probably wouldn't discover their identity. On top of that, they'd earn 500,000 private points as a reward. Being the VIP was like having a ticket to happiness. However, there were some unseen disadvantages. Due to the test's format, there would probably be many discussions and exchanges within the group. You'd have to come up with lies on the spot. Even though anonymity was ideal, it largely depended on what you could and couldn't do. Your class and the other classes might grow to resent you.

The third option: "The traitor finds the VIP." In that case, a student learns the VIP's identity. They either submit their answer right

away, or send the school an email after the test ends with the correct answer. Incredibly, in this case the test could end immediately after it begins. The traitor would earn fifty class points and determine which classes would end up on top. In addition, the individual traitor would earn 500,000 private points.

This meant that someone could deceive another class and contribute to their own. For everyone, this would be an ideal result.

Finally, the last option: “The traitor is misled about the VIP’s identity.” This option had the biggest downside. If you were mistaken and guessed incorrectly, the person who submitted the incorrect answer would be slapped with a penalty, causing his or her class to lose fifty points. On top of that, the VIP would receive private points, and his or her class would receive class points. I wanted to avoid that outcome most of all.

This test was about thinking. The school said this required cognitive abilities, which seemed true. This test carried dangers far different from those we’d faced on the island. There were twelve groups, with twelve outcomes. In the worst-case scenario, we’d end up with a huge difference in points from which we couldn’t recover. On the flip side, it was also possible for Class D to overtake Class A in one go. Of course, such a thing wouldn’t happen easily any time soon, but just the possibility was amazing. That’s exactly why the school’s rules here were stricter than during the test on the island.

“There should also be a list of prohibited actions on the sheet. Make sure to examine it thoroughly.”

Listed were things like stealing another person’s cell phone; using threats to confirm information related to the VIP; using someone else’s cell phone without their permission to submit answers; and so on. The highest level of punishment for these actions was expulsion. Furthermore, if any suspicious activity were discovered, the school would open up a thorough investigation to make sure no one had broken any rules.

If someone lied about using threatening force, they could be expelled. It seemed like we were being monitored heavily, so it was best to keep that in mind. Also, the sheet said that discussion among students from other classes was forbidden until after the examination ended. If you broke that rule, you’d be expelled. I easily memorized the list of rules.

“Tomorrow, you will go to your designated room at 1:00 p.m. and again at 8:00 p.m. Your group’s name will be displayed on a nameplate outside. Be sure to introduce yourselves when you meet the other members for the first time. After you’ve entered, leaving the

room during the examination is not permitted. Please use the restroom ahead of time. In the event that you feel ill or can't endure it any longer, please contact your homeroom teacher immediately and make a request."

"Wait, we can't leave the room? How long do we need to stay in there?"

"The explanation is written on the sheet. The discussion period is for one hour. Aside from self-introduction upon your initial meeting, you are free to use that time however you like. Once the hour has passed, you are free to remain in the room or to leave."

So the students dictated the meeting's events?

"Agh. Well, this sounds kinda annoying, but I guess I do understand somewhat. Ugh. I just wish we had a test that was more fun."

"The school is committed to fairness, so we will be strict and impartial. After the VIP has been selected, we will not accept any changes, not even if the VIP wants to be changed. In addition, copying, deleting, transferring, or modifying emails sent from the school is prohibited. Understand these points clearly."

That was written about in detail on the list. We were decidedly not allowed to tamper with emails sent by the school, or use them to spread misinformation. On the flip side, that meant that any message sent from the school was 100% the truth.

"…"

"Hey, Ayanokouji. You've been quiet. Do you actually understand everything?" said Yukimura, seated on my left. It was unclear whether he was angry or concerned.

"For the most part, I guess. I'd like you to explain the things I don't fully understand later, though."

"For crying out loud, why on *earth* was I lumped in with a bunch of space cadets?"

After that, the meeting was over, and we were told to leave the room. I felt discontent from my neighbors, who seemed to be harboring unpleasant feelings. I pretended not to notice.

"I hate to say this, but if we have to be in the same group, we need to put up a unified front. A lot of things will depend on who the VIP is, but for now, the four of us should discuss things." Yukimura spoke as we left Mashima-sensei and walked down the hallway. However, Karuizawa showed no concern at all for the future. Ignoring us, she took out her cell phone and walked away.

“H-hey, Karuizawa. Are you listening?!”

Karuizawa, totally unconcerned, started to make a call. I was kind of impressed. It was like she had nerves of steel.

“Ah, hi, Hirata-kun? There was something I wanted to talk to you about.”

She was probably going to complain to Hirata. She quickly strode down the hall and disappeared.

“Why on *earth* was I lumped in with a bunch of *space cadets*?”

“Oh ho, you uttered that exact same expression word for word not five minutes earlier, did you not? Hah!” the Professor chortled.

Our vacation had come to an end, and round two had just begun. Well, I’d expected this. Feeling depressed by this whole situation, I decided to return to my room.

“This has turned into quite a bothersome ordeal. Being partnered with a bitch like that, I mean,” spat the Professor after Karuizawa disappeared from view.

The Professor often said he wanted to go to the 2D world, and that 2D women were perfect. Knowing that, I understood why he’d strongly reject real girls like Karuizawa.

“To be honest, I really hate it. No matter what I do, she’ll only drag us down.”

“That is certainly true, hmm? She’s an unforgivable bitch. She’s a bitch among bitches, wouldn’t you say?” replied the Professor, as if agreeing with Yukimura. He exhaled loudly out of his nose and patted his belly.

“Maybe in the morning there’ll be a notification that one of us was chosen as the VIP. If one of us *is* chosen, it’d be smart not to spread it around carelessly. We don’t know who might be listening. Let’s get to a secure location before sharing info.”

I agreed with that plan. Although the ship was rather spacious, people might be listening in unexpected places.

“Karuizawa may be gone, but I want to talk about tomorrow. It makes sense to discuss it with just the three of us. Let’s go.”

“I am terribly sorry, but I must decline your invitation. For you see, the Love Love Alive anime calls, and I cannot afford to miss its siren song. I bid you farewell. Hi-ya!”

He vanished like a ninja. Well, not really—the Professor was well visible as he walked away. Yukimura, with only me remaining, sighed as if he were giving up and shook his head. He didn’t seem to

want to work with me. Guess we weren't going to have a discussion.

I supposed I should report to Horikita. I wanted to know if she'd received the same information as the Rabbit group. I sent details to her in chat, and while I waited on her report, I started to come up with a strategy.

2.4

I returned to my room, dying for a moment of peace and quiet. In the middle of dozing, I thought I heard a noise, and propped myself up in bed. Neither Yukimura nor Kouenji were in the room.

"I'm sorry. Did I wake you?"

Hirata, who'd been putting his luggage back in order, looked up with a slightly apologetic expression. He was putting on his uniform, which made me think he was getting ready to leave.

"Nah, I wasn't really in a deep sleep or anything. I'm pretty thirsty anyway, so it's a good time to get up."

I went ahead and shut off the alarm that had been about to go off. I'd wanted to check on Horikita anyway, so there wasn't a problem.

"Would you like to come with me? I was thinking the school's message should be coming pretty soon."

It was just before 20:30, then. Whether due to coincidence or fate, that just happened to be the time Horikita had been summoned to her meeting. I had no reason to refuse, so Hirata and I stepped out into the hallway, with me still wearing my jersey.

"The test seems really unusual. Well, that's just a feeling I have."

It seemed like Hirata already knew the test's specifics. I wondered if he'd heard about it from another student.

"I heard it from Yukimura-kun. He told me about it while we were eating. He told me all about the Rabbit group. It seems like everyone has been receiving explanations of the test. Several people have come to talk to me about it."

Yukimura didn't exactly like Hirata much, but maybe he thought telling Hirata would improve our chances of winning. If you understood the rules beforehand, it would be easier to glean more information when you were listening to the official explanation. Yukimura might have told Hirata in order to hear what Hirata thought afterward, and to see if there was anything new to think about.

Of course, that was surprisingly bold. I'd have liked to follow his example and team up with a superior student.

"Did you notice anything, Ayanokouji-kun? If it's okay, I'd like you to share it with me."

"Can't really say. I haven't been thinking about the exam like

you, Horikita, and Yukimura have. I'm not smart, either, so I haven't really noticed much." I tilted my head to the side, as if nothing sprang to mind.

I wasn't going to tell Hirata anything more.

"Well, I was wondering why the explanations are so…scattered. I thought maybe the school wanted to avoid the confusion and trouble that would come from explaining things in one large group, but after thinking about it, I don't believe it would take much more effort to announce the rules to everyone at once."

"Yeah, I think you're right, Hirata. It would definitely be more efficient to explain the test to all the students at the same time, rather than dividing us into groups and doing it in stages."

Hirata's doubts were right on the money. The school had adopted a clearly inefficient method. Perhaps we should consider why they would split us up, and for what reason. It was possible that our "thinking" was already being tested.

"I'm planning to ask the teacher about that later."

I wondered how things would shake out. Hirata normally acted on behalf of Class D. Considering he'd be lumped in with other classes, I couldn't imagine what he thought of these rules, or what he'd do about them.

2.5

Hirata's meeting place was on the second deck, only one level below us. We took the stairs instead of the elevator. I saw quite a few students waiting around compared to earlier. Some of the students were leaning against the wall. Others were sitting down, fiddling around on their phones. They looked totally unprepared for the explanation they were about to receive.

"It doesn't seem like all of these people are in my group," Hirata said.

At a glance, it looked like there were close to ten people here. Considering the time, even if some part of the group had already been briefed, it did seem rather strange. Did this meeting have some other purpose? Were they all checking to see who belonged to which group? If so, they didn't need to spend all this time and effort. If you just talked to your classmates later, you could figure out the groups right away.

They glanced up as we passed, but then immediately went back to their cell phones, like they were in the middle of something. Sadly, I knew very little about the students from the other classes. I wasn't acquainted with most people I'd run into here, and I didn't know which classes they were all from.

"Who are those people?" I asked.

"That's Morimiya-kun, from Class A. And that one near the elevator is Tokitou-kun, from Class C."

Just how I'd expect a well-connected person to respond. I burned the names and faces of the students into my memory. It was a surprising number of people. Maybe they'd felt restless, and arrived early to wait. You know, like trying to get a table at a popular restaurant. I kept moving, thinking how easy this would all be if it operated like that.

When Hirata and I arrived, several guys and girls were gathered near the door. I also noticed a familiar face who'd received the same meeting time as Hirata. The meeting hadn't started yet, so we approached the line without making a fuss.

"Unless I'm mistaken, you're also in the group meeting at 20:40, yes?"

I heard a rather low, deep voice. Katsuragi, from Class A. He had an incredibly calm and collected demeanor for a first-year high school student. He was cool and composed, and had a good physique to boot.

You could mistake him for a college student at first glance. Even though Class A boasted many excellent students, most had already acknowledged him as their leader.

"Yes, I am. And what exactly does that have to do with you?" answered the girl with long black hair, who faced Katsuragi without hesitation.

"I knew it," he said. "That's good news. I wanted to speak with you again. I'm also in the 20:40 group. Starting tomorrow, we will be working together."

Horikita Suzune stared back at Katsuragi. So Hirata had been placed with both Horikita and Katsuragi. Quite a team.

"You wanted to speak with me? Funny. Didn't you completely ignore me the other day?" she said.

During the test on the island, Horikita and Katsuragi had crossed paths only once. At the time, Katsuragi showed no interest in Horikita and hadn't tried to hold a conversation with her. However, the tables had apparently turned. Three guys who probably belonged to Class A grouped around Katsuragi, as well as two girls from either Class B or C. They listened in on the conversation from a short distance away.

"You're correct. I certainly haven't acknowledged anyone in Class D until now. However, considering the incredible results from the last test, it would be impossible for me not to pay attention to you. Wouldn't you agree? You laid the groundwork to win, and succeeded handsomely."

He probably never could have imagined that Class D would be triumphant. From Katsuragi's point of view, his contact with Horikita in front of the cave had all been a part of her strategy. Horikita had certainly made big waves within Class D, and the number of girls who admired her had increased over the last few days. Unfortunately, Horikita didn't exactly respond well to people who wanted to become friends with her. However, compared to how things had gone in the past, she'd hurt and enraged fewer people than usual. Her classmates now seemed to interpret her selfish demeanor as concern for the class.

With that in mind, Horikita's refusal to become anyone's friend now came across differently. Interactions with her suddenly became more nuanced. Even if she gave them the cold shoulder, people didn't really take offense. If anything, they might've found it cute. Other classes now viewed Horikita as more than a superior student with good grades. Because of the results she'd garnered, they viewed her as a puppet master, a mastermind who worked behind the scenes. They viewed her as a threat, and were on guard around her.

“I don’t know what the future might hold, but…should Class D overtake Class C, know that Class A would attack you without mercy.”

“That’s rather petty. From Class A’s perspective, are we such a big deal? I mean, there’s a significant gap in points between us.”

“That’s certainly true. However, we must be cautious. It’s no laughing matter when those who have been perceived as weak and stupid begin to rise up. If one class manages to change its station, we must be vigilant. I would give the same warning to both Classes B and C.”

There wasn’t much we could do about being seen as a threat, though. Katsuragi’s entourage collectively glared at Horikita. An ordinary girl would’ve burst into tears, but Horikita didn’t seem intimidated in the slightest.

The situation appeared hopeless, until an unexpected arrival changed everything. The girls’ faces instantly lit up as a boy walked quietly past us.

“I don’t much like ganging up on people, or threatening other classes.”

This was Kanzaki, a Class B student. Though he wore his hair rather long, he didn’t come off like a slacker at all. He was an honest type. Although I didn’t really know him personally, Ichinose—Class B’s leader—seemed to trust him. Since Horikita and Kanzaki had faced off once before during our summer vacation, he knew of her incredible intellect.

“You don’t need to waste time on Katsuragi. He’s just trying to get to you.” Kanzaki spoke like a gentleman to Horikita, even though they weren’t on particularly good terms.

“You needn’t concern yourself. Class D has always been regarded as inferior. I’d welcome any change in our reputation.”

“I see. It appears you feel we’ve treated you callously up until now. Certainly, many in my class have made light of Class D. However, your success on the island changed people’s opinions.” Despite his words, Katsuragi made a dismissive gesture, like he was brushing dirt off his clothes. “However, just because you got lucky and won by complete chance doesn’t make us equals.”

“What do you mean?”

“Anyone could accomplish something like that out of pure luck. It’s better that you don’t grow arrogant and behave foolishly after a win that came about by chance. Remember that the difference in our class points is still massive.”

Well, that was true. Bridging the gap between us would still be difficult. Of course, Horikita understood that. She also knew that the island was *my* victory, but I'd refused to take credit for anything. Right now, Horikita didn't seem too happy to take the credit; she didn't love being in the spotlight. She'd mainly done it so other people wouldn't discover me. Really, it was all for my benefit.

"We haven't gotten into college yet. I don't think you and I are so different. The school arbitrarily divided us into different classes. Don't forget that."

Kanzaki, who'd been standing by watching this scene unfold, saw where all this was headed. "Hirata, looks like you landed in a troublesome group."

"Yes. Though if I'm with you, Kanzaki-kun, and Katsuragi-kun, struggle has to be inevitable."

"Oh, I don't think so."

"Hmm?"

Someone came up behind me and walked over to Kanzaki, then proceeded toward Horikita.

"Well, well. So many fish in this pond. I've come to take a look for myself."

"Ryuuen." Katsuragi's tone grew grim. Even Kanzaki stiffened.

"Are you part of this meeting as well? Or were you just walking by?"

"Unfortunately, it looks like I'm with you."

Three students followed behind Ryuuen. It was like Katsuragi's entourage, but also completely different, more like a king and his servants. They all wore terrified looks, and their movements seemed so docile.

"How about you put on a little show for me? What do you think of *Beauty and the Beast*?" said Ryuuen. He looked at both Horikita and Katsuragi, and let out a demented little chuckle.

In the face of this obvious provocation, Katsuragi stayed calm. "Well, I originally thought that our group would be comprised solely of students with a high level of academic ability. Now that you and your lackeys are here, I'm not so sure."

"Academic ability? How droll. That kind of thing is meaningless."

"That's a rather deplorable thing to say. Especially when academic success is the most important factor in determining our

futures. You realize that Japan is often referred to as an academic society?"

Katsuragi struck back against Ryuuen's cavalier attitude with a sound argument. However, Ryuuen wasn't so easily convinced. He gestured to his crew, almost as if to ask, "Can you believe what this idiot is saying?" His minions agreed immediately, their response mechanical.

"I won't let you bring your awful attitude to this test."

"Hmm? Awful attitude? What in the world are you talking about? I can't possibly imagine. Can you perhaps tell me how I am, in fact, awful?"

"Well, it doesn't matter. Since we're in the same group now, we'll be able to talk at length."

For a minute there, I thought there'd be a huge showdown before the test had even begun.

“Huh, Hirata-kun? Oh, Ayanokouji-kun, too? What are you all doing here?”

Kushida approached us, wearing a puzzled look. Apparently not everyone in Class D fully understood the parameters of the exam. Our class seemed to be one or two steps behind.

“Wait, Kushida-san. You’re not meeting in the 20:40 group, are you?”

“Hmm? Group? I don’t understand. I *did* get an email telling me to come here at this time… Wow, there really are some amazing people here, huh?”

Even though Kushida was somewhat taken back, she still showed respect for everyone gathered.

“Are you okay, Hirata? I think this is going to be an especially grueling battle.”

“Don’t worry. No matter who is in my group, I’ll do my best.”

Hirata was positive, as always. Kushida didn’t understand the circumstances, but she was smart. By looking at the gathered people and listening to their fragmented conversations, she would begin to grasp the situation.

“Um, well. So, it feels like a lot of really difficult things are about to come our way,” she said.

“Roughly speaking, yeah. You’d best mentally prepare yourself.”

“Ah ha! Don’t worry, it’s okay! Like Hirata-kun said, all I can do is my best. Oh, I haven’t really had many chances to talk with Katsuragi-kun and Ryuuen-kun yet. I’d like to get along with you all, too.” Kushida spoke to everyone present without any anxiety, disgust, displeasure, or joy in her voice.

“If we’re going to continue this pointless conversation, I’d prefer to just go inside. Besides, it’s about time.”

With those cold words, Horikita flipped her hair and turned her back on Ryuuen and his minions. I had to give it to her: Horikita didn’t back down. Weak-willed people tended to lower their heads and ingratiate themselves into their group, no matter what. They would beg forgiveness if they were isolated or ostracized. But Horikita wasn’t perturbed. She acted as she always did.

“Apparently, I don’t need to worry all that much.”

Of course, it wasn’t clear exactly how far she’d get like that, considering who was in her group. Even so, I didn’t think she’d get the wind taken out of her sails. That was just my intuition.

“Well then, good luck.” I left Hirata with those sympathetic words. He had his work cut out for him from now on.

ADVANCED NURTURING HIGH SCHOOL DATABASE DATE: 7/1

NAME:	Katsuragi Kouhei
CLASS:	First Year, Class A
STUDENT ID:	S01T004706
CLUB AFFILIATIONS:	None
DATE OF BIRTH:	August 29th

EVALUATION

ACADEMIC ABILITY:	A
INTELLIGENCE:	A
DECISION MAKING:	B
PHYSICAL ABILITY:	C
COOPERATIVENESS:	B–

COMMENTS FROM THE INTERVIEWER

We are impressed by his achievements. He has always maintained top grades during elementary and junior high school, and as a member of the student council, he has brought students together. In the future, we would like for him to become a student council member at our institution. Because of this, we have decided to place him in Class A.

NOTES FROM HOMEROOM INSTRUCTOR

He is a central figure in the class, and possesses an extremely cautious and composed personality. He has no apparent deficiencies, so as a Class A student, we hope that he will strive to fulfill all expectations placed upon him.

Chapter 3:
An Infinite Variety of Wishes

Breakfast time. I avoided the buffet that was popular with a lot of the students, and made my way toward the ship's deck. There was a café called Blue Ocean, which had hardly any students early in the morning. I took a table in the shaded back, where there weren't many people around. It was 7:55 in the morning.

Just one minute before the designated meeting time, the person I was waiting for appeared. She wore an emotionless expression, like always.

"You're rather early."

Horikita sat down next to me. She was the one of the very few people at this school whom I could call a friend. She was unusually talented, and a thorn in my side, because she knew something about my hidden life.

"I was waiting for an hour." I tried teasing her a little.

"That's not my problem, as I've still arrived before the designated time. Besides, how would I know if you'd been waiting even ten hours or more?"

It really wasn't easy to tease her. Pointless, actually.

Horikita wasn't good at chit-chat. After I gave her my information yesterday, she hadn't been able to reciprocate. All she did was propose we meet here. Was this some sort of trick? "So, did you get any more details?"

"Just what you already told me. There are twelve groups, and four outcomes. Also, the school said they would send the names of the VIPs via email at 8:00 a.m. today. Any minor differences in the explanations they gave us could be attributed to differences in the way teachers communicate."

"Who's in your group? How many people do you have?" I'd seen some of the lineup yesterday, but she knew that already.

"The list is honestly surprising. It's biased to the point where I can't imagine it's a coincidence."

Horikita handed over a slip of paper, looking a little depressed. She'd written this down on her own notepad, and had memorized all the names. I took the list and looked it over. Her group name was

Dragon. I understood what Horikita meant about bias when I looked at the names.

CLASS A: Katsuragi Kouhei, Nishikawa Ryouko, Matoba Shinji, Yano Koharu

CLASS B: Andou Saya, Kanzaki Ryuuji, Tsube Hitomi

CLASS C: Oda Takumi, Suzuki Hidetoshi, Sonoda Masashi, Ryuuen Kakeru

CLASS D: Kushida Kikyou, Hirata Yousuke, Horikita Suzune

First, the Class D students, Hirata and Kushida: They were both excellent students, and representatives of our class. Excluding the fact that Horikita was far too much of a loner, she definitely had outstanding talents that let her stand shoulder to shoulder with the other two. To be perfectly honest, it was the strongest hand Class D could have dealt.

I'd thought they'd have at least one more person, but that wasn't the case. In terms of latent ability, Kouenji had an abundance, but he probably wouldn't contribute any of it to the team. I didn't know what group he was in.

"I see. This really seems like an inevitable grouping," I muttered.

Even if I just limited it to the names I knew, they had Katsuragi from Class A, Kanzaki from Class B, and Ryuuen from Class C. All class representatives. If you thought of their group like players in the qualifying rounds of a soccer league, they were the dream team, and this was a death match.

"But something feels unnatural," I added. I didn't really know many students, but it was somewhat unnatural for Ichinose to be in Rabbit and not Dragon.

"You mean Ichinose-san being in your group, don't you? I suppose only the Class B students know if she's really excellent or not. A leader's qualities and level of excellence aren't necessarily directly proportional," said Horikita.

"Wait, are you talking about yourself?" I asked.

She glared, so I averted my eyes. However, Horikita did have a point. We didn't know the finer details of Ichinose's abilities. Perhaps her academic scores were unexpectedly low.

"From what we can deduce, I wonder if there's a certain method they're using to sort us into the twelve groups? Ayanokouji-kun, your grades are very similar to Karuizawa-san's. Are they grouping us based

on our scores? Oh, but Yukimura-kun has high academic ability, and so does Kouenji-kun. They're at the top of the class," said Horikita.

She was taking our midterm grades and final exams into consideration.

"But there's probably a gap between me and the Professor, same as you and Hirata. There are too many details that don't fit the score theory."

If students were divided into groups based purely on grades, then Kouenji should have been at the top. Of course, I agreed that our grades were taken into account, but another variable was likely involved in the process. If at all possible, I would've liked to see the member lists of the other groups.

"At any rate, this is probably going to be difficult. Trying to lead the group and to outmaneuver everyone, I mean."

Well, when you had several high-ability people gathered together, the inclusion of the rather orthodox Horikita wasn't necessarily advantageous. She and Ryuuen were especially incompatible, like fire and water. I didn't like it; they were bound to clash.

But if I told Horikita that, she would probably be pissed. I decided to stay quiet. However, Horikita would probably work well with a straightforward person like Katsuragi. They both believed that intellect led to victory, so they'd get along.

"Well, it's just about time," said Horikita.

Once the clock struck 8:00, both of our phones beeped simultaneously. We immediately checked our phones. After we'd finished reading the contents of the message at almost the exact same time, Horikita turned her phone to show me the message. I did the same. We compared what was on each other's phones, confirming the finer details.

"After thorough consideration, you have not been chosen to be the VIP. Please remember to be a team player as your group tackles the challenges of this test. The exam begins today, and will be held over a period of three days. Members of the Dragon group should gather in the Dragon room located on the second deck."

My message was almost the same as Horikita's. Of course, the name of the group differed, but everything else matched up perfectly.

"I suppose neither of us was chosen, then."

While putting our phones away, we shifted in our seats.

"No, we weren't chosen. I'm not sure if we should be happy or

sad."

"Yeah. If you're chosen, then you could lead your group to any of the outcomes," I reasoned.

Being the VIP in this test placed you at an overwhelming advantage. If you kept up a good poker face, you could easily obtain 500,000 points.

"Even so, I don't like how they wrote it. It's like they're saying I'm not qualified to be the VIP."

Even though she was on the dream team, Horikita still thought of herself as working alone. That was just like her.

"In this test, there's a huge difference between the chosen students and the rest. Everyone who wasn't chosen will need to struggle to find the VIP. The school said there were no disadvantages, but that was a lie. Unless the VIP is in your class, there's a high probability that the point difference between classes will widen even further."

That was certainly true. Depending on how things went, the gap we'd managed to close after the first test might widen again.

"The leaders of each group should be coming up with a number of strategies already. If we don't decide early on how we're going to conduct ourselves, we probably won't recover."

"I understand," Horikita responded.

She gave me a slightly frustrated look. I was trying to figure out how to fight this battle. As I considered the members of my group, and the underlying mechanics of this test, the goal began to take shape.

"Are you thinking about the results?" asked Horikita, observing my expression. She sounded hesitant.

"There are some things I can't yet see, like how some of the students I don't know will react. I won't know until I meet with them directly. But I thought of a way to lead us to victory."

Of course, we couldn't behave recklessly. I'd need to time my move properly, and everything would need to be set up beforehand.

"I look forward to your results," said Horikita.

"Me too. Can't wait to see what you do with your group," I answered.

But something about that message still nagged at me. "After thorough consideration," it had said. That odd choice of words wasn't by chance. Mashima-sensei had said something to the same effect. The VIP had been chosen based on certain considerations. There was

something about the chosen that set them apart.

I couldn't get too hung up on phrasing right now. I knew that one person had been selected from each group. That meant there were twelve VIPs.

"For the sake of reference, who are you most wary of? Based on how things have been going, I wanted your thoughts," said Horikita.

Horikita's attention had shifted slightly. Since she was assigned to the most intense group, that wasn't surprising.

"Ryuuen," I answered.

"That was fast."

"There's no one else I'd choose," I replied.

"What about Katsuragi-kun? It's because of him that Class A managed to quickly hold down that prime spot on the island. Isn't he someone worth watching?"

"Of course. Considering he's only a first-year student, he's excellent. If you'd asked me who the most excellent student was, then Katsuragi would've been my answer. But if you're asking who I'm wary of, then it's Ryuuen, by a mile," I answered.

Class D had been victorious during the test on the island, without a doubt. Ryuuen had come up short in several ways. He'd telegraphed his intentions, so it ended up easy to get a read on him. However, it was highly likely that Ryuuen had read my intentions, too. I wanted to avoid him finding out that I was the one responsible for Horikita's success on the island.

"I'm curious about some things concerning the VIP's identity. Even after reading the message and thinking about it, did you notice any unnatural-sounding phrases in the school's email? And the strict —" Horikita said.

I silenced her by pressing my finger to her lips. Speak of the devil—a shadow appeared before us.

"Nice weather, eh Suzune? You having breakfast with this clingy beta male?"

Two people approached us, each wearing an unsettling grin. One of them was Ryuuen, the very subject of our discussion. The other person was…

"I've warned you not to call me by my first name, Ryuuen-kun. Also, considering you were a turncoat who only pretended to be our friend, it's odd you'd show your face, Ibuki-san."

Beside Ryuuen stood a female student, Ibuki Mio. She had a

somewhat cocksure gleam in her eyes. She also happened to be in the Rabbit group with me.

"…"

Ibuki seemed slightly disapproving of Horikita's light provocation, but didn't snap back. Instead, she bit down lightly on her lower lip. Ryuuen, watching things unfold out of the corner of his eye, flashed a satisfied smile. During the test on the island, Ibuki had infiltrated Class D as a spy. Eventually, Horikita had caught Ibuki red-handed, but ended up catching Ibuki's fist during their ensuing confrontation. Horikita firmly insisted that if she hadn't been ill at the time, she wouldn't have lost the fight, but right now, I wasn't really concerned about who was stronger.

Ryuuen silenced Ibuki. He appeared to be mocking us. "You should have received the message already. What were the results? Were you chosen as the VIP?"

"As if I would tell you. Perhaps you'd like to tell us about *your* message?" Horikita responded.

"If you wish." Ryuuen straddled one of the two vacant seats. "But before that, I want to ask you something. How did you wrangle those results on the island test?"

"I have nothing to tell you," Horikita responded.

Horikita looked completely calm; she didn't shake or waver in the slightest. There was nothing false about her attitude, either. She had incredible acting ability. She probably didn't think she was acting, though. Even though she didn't show any weakness, Ryuuen wasn't convinced.

"I suppose you wouldn't give anything away, but that doesn't matter. According to my information, there's no way that your farcical bumbling on the island should've led to victory," said Ryuuen.

"I'm not so stupid that I'd let someone like *her* see through me. Things were simply more difficult because of my fever."

In responsive to that more blatant provocation, Ibuki could no longer hide her irritation. "In that case, let's have a rematch," she challenged.

Horikita kept her cool as Ibuki became more and more riled up. "Regrettably, I must decline your offer. Violent actions are considered a violation of the test rules. If you *do* happen to strike me, I will not hesitate to report it to the school. At any rate, please feel free to do whatever you please," she said flatly.

"Tch!"

Ibuki closed the distance between herself and Horikita, looking ready to lunge, but she stopped herself. If you thoughtlessly went on a rampage here, you wouldn't escape punishment. More than anything else, though, Ibuki was working beneath Ryuuen. She didn't have the right to act freely. While Ibuki clearly detested Ryuuen, she was also exceptionally talented. That was likely the precise reason why Ryuuen had chosen her as the spy to infiltrate Class D.

"Since we're all together, how about we have some coffee? It seems a good time to enjoy a nice cup," Horikita offered.

She seemed in a strangely good mood as she ordered her morning coffee. I ordered the same thing. Ryuuen showed no signs of leaving, apparently wanting to continue the conversation. He continued to observe the silent Horikita, and opened his mouth once again when the coffee arrived. "Yesterday, it seemed Katsuragi was rather cautious of you," he said.

"Well, that's understandable. He couldn't have guessed that someone from Class D would do so well. Isn't that why you and Ibuki-san are here? You came to check on me. Am I wrong?" asked Horikita.

"Heh. Well, I won't deny that. I came here to measure your abilities for myself," he answered.

"Of course," Horikita answered, sipping her coffee. She seemed at ease, which was unusual.

“Katsuragi and I think differently. When I’m dealing with someone, I like to keep an eye on them.”

“You’re free to do as you please, but what exactly are you thinking?” asked Horikita.

“I’m remembering the test on the island. The result. The process that led to it. There are only certain types of people who would’ve been able to conceptualize and execute a plan like that. A girl like you is far too serious-minded to have come up with it,” reasoned Ryuuen.

“Think whatever you like. Though I wonder…how did you figure out my strategy? You only saw the results of the test. How do you know the way in which points were gained and lost? Those details are supposed to be unknown,” countered Horikita.

In response to Horikita’s calm demeanor, Ryuuen flashed his teeth in curious amusement. “Katsuragi probably didn’t know.”

Based on how he’d said it, Ryuuen most likely *did* know.

“Well, why don’t you explain it to me? If you’re correct, I’ll give you an answer. If you *can* answer, that is,” Horikita added. Ryuuen just laughed unnervingly.

“At the end of the test, I wrote down your name as leader, but that was wrong. There’s just one reason why that was wrong: Your class leader changed right before the test ended. The only explanation,” mused Ryuuen.

“Do you think that was hard to deduce? Any idiot could have figured that out if they thought about it for a minute. Even Katsuragi-kun, who you’ve been making fun of,” answered Horikita.

“Ah. However, Katsuragi thinks *you* planned the whole thing. But was that really the case? In my opinion, you becoming the leader and then retiring were both unexpected. Besides, I had my own strategy in place. I had Ibuki infiltrate your class to find out the leader’s identity. You did nothing to counter that strategy at first,” said Ryuuen.

“Is it possible that I’d simply taken the proper precautions? Preparing for the unknown is absolutely basic logic. The moment Ibuki-san met Class D, I took all possibilities into account. You were so confident, but your argument ended up being flimsy. You’ve said nothing surprising,” responded Horikita.

“The key question is who replaced you as leader. Personally, I think the second leader was pulling your strings from behind the scenes during the entire test.”

It was exactly as Ryuuen had said. Though he spoke to Horikita,

he observed me quietly. If I appeared shaken for even an instant, he'd pounce.

"I'm afraid I can't understand you at all. I have no close friends. The closest I have would be Ayanokouji-kun here, and he's always dragging me down. I'd be hard-pressed to say that he's working with me. Sad, but true," answered Horikita.

By specifically drawing attention to me, Horikita had managed to make me seem useless. Well done.

"However, if we *did* change leaders, he wouldn't be the most likely candidate."

"I see." Ryuuen glanced at me, but quickly looked away. "Well, I suppose that's expected of a clingy tagalong."

"So now you understand. Though I wonder what basis you had for your hypothesis," said Horikita.

"That guy with you is considerably smart. Despite that, he hasn't achieved anything significant, or gotten high grades. He has some excellent qualities, though I have my doubts," said Ryuuen.

"You've investigated Class D rather thoroughly, it seems. Ayanokouji-kun, we've been putting you down mercilessly. Aren't you going to defend yourself?" asked Horikita.

"I would if I had anything to defend," I responded. My lazy façade had become the perfect counterattack. I'm not exactly sure how he figured that out, but Ryuuen appeared to understand me. Maybe he'd spent time measuring my academic abilities, physical abilities, and even communication skills. Grades were objective and reliable. You couldn't deceive others with that information.

"Well, I'm sorry, but what you're saying is complete nonsense. It's a child's excuse, used because he's upset that he lost and needs to resort to fantasy. Does it embarrass you that a girl managed to see through your schemes?" asked Horikita.

"I see your point. I never imagined you'd trip me up. I'll admit it. The results of the test shocked me," answered Ryuuen.

Even though he'd admitted weakness, Ryuuen laughed. If anything, he acted like our actions had been almost irrational.

"Well, that's too bad. I love surprise attacks, foul play, and subterfuge. That level of strategy was totally unexpected, but your victory high will soon come to an end. Whether it's you, Suzune, or someone pulling the strings behind the scenes, you're stupid. You've already made your best move. Class D is one or two steps behind the other classes in points. The challenge will only heat up from here. You

already played your trump card during the survival test, when the game was just getting started. You couldn't see what was in front of or behind you. I don't think you'll find this round as easy as last time. Tell that to whoever helped you ace the test," warned Ryuuen.

"My goodness, that was rather thoughtful," said Horikita.

"What can I say? I'm quite merciful."

"It sounds like you really want to believe that we have a secret weapon in our class," observed Horikita.

Ryuuen didn't answer. Even though he didn't have any evidence, he couldn't restrain from doubting Horikita. Ryuuen believed in himself more than anyone else. He refused to accept even the slightest hint of advice from others. He didn't appear to want to confirm anything during this encounter, only to chat with Horikita and pass the time amusing himself.

Ryuuen took out his phone and pointed it toward Horikita. He snapped a single picture, the shutter from his camera making a clicking sound.

"Don't take my photo without permission!" snapped Horikita.

"Relax. Here, I'll show you," said Ryuuen.

Ryuuen looked at the picture he'd taken of Horikita, which showed her wearing a particularly sour expression. He put his phone away, looking satisfied.

"Someone in Class D other than you is quite clever. There's no mistake about that," he said.

"Well, isn't that a good thing? I don't particularly care. Besides, if you just arbitrarily jump to conclusions, why bother badgering me to confirm them?" asked Horikita.

"A conversation reveals many subtle things. I'm glad I could talk with you, Suzune. It's a game to me. I'll discover who among you is making moves behind the scenes. Everyone, including your clingy friend here, is a target," said Ryuuen.

"Let me ask you something. I know it hurts that I saw through you, but why are you so fixated on me? Aren't you concerned about anyone else? Like Ichinose-san, or Katsuragi-kun? Going by the rumors, there's someone named Sakayanagi, too. Shouldn't the people in the classes *above* C be your concern? You should be able to at least answer that, I think," said Horikita.

Horikita was right to question him. Ryuuen's focus was downright obsessive.

“I already know their abilities, to some extent. Neither Katsuragi nor Ichinose is my enemy. If I wanted to crush them, I could do it any time.”

“So what about Sakayanagi?”

Ibuki asked that, not Horikita. She wanted to confirm that information herself, apparently. Ryuuen, who’d been unflappable until now, was silent before responding.

“I’m saving her for the final course. It’d be a waste to eat her now. Let’s go, Ibuki.” Ryuuen stood and left with his lackey.

“You’re a person of interest, Horikita,” I mused.

“And who’s responsible for that, hmm?”

“Are you upset?”

“Not really. It’s just that I hate your sarcastic way of speaking. I’ve always aimed to reach Class A, so I assumed I’d be attracting a lot of attention,” she answered.

“I’m glad to hear that. Well, at any rate, this doesn’t seem good. Ryuuen isn’t an ordinary opponent.”

“Really? I think he just doesn’t like that I found him out, and wanted to trick me into revealing the truth. I can’t imagine he narrowed down the list of potential candidates to you. Besides, even if he knew your identity, you’d be the only one in trouble,” replied Horikita.

I knew he suspected me, but that wasn’t important. I didn’t know what Ryuuen was thinking, but the fact that he showed up here was dangerous.

“I think we were being spied on. Him suddenly meeting up with us is too convenient,” I said.

“Are you talking about Ibuki-san?”

“Maybe she was forced to keep an eye on us, or maybe she just happened to see us by chance. If that’s the case, it would help us,” I said.

Ibuki hadn’t looked tired. Someone else may have been keeping watch, but Ibuki was likely involved, considering she was walking with Ryuuen. If I had to guess, Ryuuen was already implementing his new strategy, and using this test to do so. I was the first person to join up with Horikita. There probably weren’t many people he’d suspect to begin with.

“A mistake,” I muttered.

He’d seemingly meant to say that there was someone smart here,

someone just like him, but that was a little easy. Our encounter may have given Ryuuen an even bigger hint than I'd imagined. Was I just being overly concerned about the test?

"You're overthinking things. No one thinks you're involved. Despite what he said, he thinks you're an ordinary person, considering your lackluster achievements in the first semester," said Horikita.

I didn't know if that was a compliment or not, but she certainly had a point. No matter how much Ryuuen investigated me, he would find nothing. Even so, because I was close to Horikita, I was undoubtedly being watched. At any rate, since Ibuki was in my group, she'd be an obstacle. It was going to be very difficult to maneuver.

Students started popping up here and there around us, and I stood up. "I think we're done for the time being. I'm still sleepy, so I'm going to head back to my room," I muttered.

Horikita appeared fine with that, like she didn't need any advice. "Discussion is likely useless from here on out. We'll go our separate ways. Anyway, excellent work. If you make any progress, give me a report."

Despite being surrounded by powerful foes, Horikita was indomitable. Well, Hirata and Kushida would hopefully keep her in check. I'd head back to my room and sleep until the afternoon. Even though the test had started, I'd be useless until the time came.

3.1

"Sorry to keep you waiting! *Urrp! Urp!* If you eat three heavy meals for lunch, you'll naturally have a full belly. I considered going on a diet, but it seemed futile," said the Professor. He walked up to me while patting his full belly, which was more swollen than usual. He met Yukimura and me right in front of the appointed room.

"You're rather relaxed, considering the test has just begun. Me, I can hardly eat."

"If you're not at full strength, there'll be trouble. It's like choosing a higher difficulty setting in a video game, wouldn't you say?" the Professor responded.

"Stop talking like that. It's weird," said Yukimura.

Of course, all the Professor's talk sounded like arcane magic to people who weren't accustomed to nerd culture.

Once you got used to it, it was fine. However, if I tried joining in right now, I'd probably antagonize Yukimura, so I decided to refrain.

"Oh ho! Hmm, dost thou not care for my linguistic idiosyncrasies? Well then, Yukimura-dono, what wouldst thou like?" The Professor seemed like he *wanted* to antagonize Yukimura.

"Whatever, I don't care. Just talk normal."

"From now on, I shall be like the protagonist who appears weak, but secretly has massive strength. I normally have no motivation, but I'll become a completely OP cheater with enough power to destroy the entire world. I mean, I'm just following the current trends!" the Professor mused.

The Professor seemed like he wanted to become some mystery character from a game or anime. I no longer understood what in the world he was talking about. If we'd been in a gag manga right now, this would be the moment when Yukimura's glasses would probably crack.

Yukimura stormed away from us. The Professor and I hurried after him.

"Ayanokouji. There's something I wish to ask you. Please give me a straight answer," said the Professor.

The Professor was talking like he was Takakura Ken or something, like he really was the protagonist of a story. He even had the same brooding expression. I had to hold myself back from instinctively calling him "Ken-san."

“You want to ask me something?”

“I’ve considered what kind of speech patterns you might like. Of course, a pleasant dialect that a cute heroine character uses would be good,” said the Professor. He spoke in a very cool, stoic way, but his words were the same as always.

“No, I don’t have a favorite speech pattern or anything. Not especially, anyway,” I answered. For someone who was born and raised in Tokyo, I didn’t really know much about other dialects and the like.

“Have you perhaps encountered a speech pattern that felt *moe*?” the Professor asked.

Who the hell possessed such a speech pattern, anyway? Well, I’d keep talking to him for a little longer, since I wanted to kill time. “Well, Professor, what about you? Do you have a speech pattern you like?” I asked.

“Of course. I’ll rank them. In third place would be ‘Even if you say so, Kudo!’ That’s the old stand-by, the Kansai-ben! It tends to give a somewhat tough or crude impression, but it’s the obvious choice. It’s an essential dialect. In second place is the beautiful girl from a snowy country, the Hokkaido-ben! When they say, ‘Oh, sorry for the trouble, thanks,’ and stuff like that, it just makes me swoon! Those unique phrases are so *moe* they make me want to die! It also gets points because it’s not used very widely in the 2D world!” exclaimed the Professor.

Uh oh. I had almost no clue what anything he said meant. But before I was able to collect my thoughts on the matter, the Professor freely segued into the final part of his announcement, using his lips to make a bizarre drumroll sound.

“Dourururururururu… Coming in first place, jumping from little girls to the older sister, the universal Hakata-ben! When I hear stuff like ‘I like ya!’ or ‘Ya like me?’, it just sounds great! In addition to the wide variation the dialect offers, you could also say that it’s the broadest there is, even at its core! Those are the best three by far!” the Professor shouted.

Unfortunately, he was talking in a language I didn’t speak, but his passion came through loud and clear. At any rate, we’d killed some time. We arrived at a second-level room with a nameplate that read “Rabbit.” The test had just begun, so the hallways were packed with students. Even so, it didn’t feel cramped, most likely because the ship was so large.

“The time for screwing around ended yesterday. From here on

out, we need to fight for ourselves and for our classes." Yukimura directed that statement toward the Professor, but I nodded in acknowledgement.

"Ugh. No matter how you look at it, we really do have the worst team."

Karuizawa entered the room, casting her eyes away from us. We had eleven people, Karuizawa included, and all sat in chairs arranged in a big circle. Given the low number of vacant spots, we were likely the last to arrive. I didn't know everyone's names, but aside from Ichinose and Ibuki, there was another student I recognized. It was the boy from Class A who I'd bumped into completely by chance during the previous test, who'd proposed that I betray Class D. I hardly recognized any of the other guys or girls. Rivals up until today, we suddenly had to cooperate with each other.

Naturally, the other classes were puzzled as well, not just Class D. Students mostly divided into natural groups based on their class, but Karuizawa and Ibuki both sat a little further away, as if isolating themselves.

"Why did they…?" I muttered.

"What's the matter, Ayanokouji? Something on your mind?"

"It's nothing," I said.

I'd thought for sure that Karuizawa would confront Ibuki the moment she saw her. After all, Ibuki Mio had stolen Karuizawa's underwear back on the island. You'd think she'd want revenge, but… Well, maybe Karuizawa was more mature than I'd thought, or maybe she'd already gotten her revenge. In any case, it was all rather unnatural.

Before I could speak, a voice came through the ship's loudspeakers.

"The first group discussion begins now."

A short, concise announcement. Naturally, no one was taking the lead. An awkward pall hung over the room. Then Ichinose Honami cracked a small smile and stood up.

"Your attention, please! I don't know most of you, but I think we ought to introduce ourselves. After all, there are probably people here who haven't met before," she said.

It was just like her to immediately volunteer herself as the leader. It wasn't easy to take initiative and pull a group of people together, no matter how popular you were. The fact that we were enemies didn't make it any easier, but Ichinose didn't seem to dislike

her role. If anything, she seemed to be having fun. Some of the Class A students appeared somewhat perplexed.

"Is it really necessary to introduce ourselves, though? I don't think the school seriously meant that. I think it's fine if only the people who want to introduce themselves do it, right?"

"Well, if that's how you feel, Machida-kun, I can't force you to do anything. However, a microphone might have been installed somewhere in the room to record everything we're saying, don't you think? If that's true, it may not be an issue for just the people who don't introduce themselves. The entire group might end up shouldering the blame," warned Ichinose.

She had a point. Individual non-cooperation here could be a problem for everyone. Put like that, not even Machida could refute her.

Ichinose introduced herself first. I tried to put a little effort into my self-introduction, remembering how I'd failed to introduce myself well during the entrance ceremony. But in the end, my introduction was just as monotonous.

"Hey there, Ayanokouji-kun. Looks like we're in the same group! I'm looking forward to working with you," said Ichinose.

She probably meant to comfort and console me. I took my seat. Once everyone had finished, Ichinose spoke again.

"Now that we've finished, how do you think we should proceed? Please tell me if anyone disagrees with my taking the lead," said Ichinose.

Ichinose appeared ready for someone else to volunteer as leader. Of course, whoever opposed her would have to publicly volunteer him or herself. Some students might've been dissatisfied with how Ichinose handled things, but since they likely feared being burdened with leadership, no one raised their hand.

"Well, since it looks like no one especially wants the spot, I'll take the lead. To begin with, I think if there's any point that people don't understand or are worried about, we should all discuss it. If we don't, the situation will get worse over time. Does anyone have any questions?"

Because people never want to speak up in front of a group and make a fool of themselves, no one raised their hand. Ichinose put a hand on her hip and smiled, undaunted.

"There's something I'd like to talk to you all about. I'd like you all to assume that no one here is the VIP, and I'd like for us all to work

together and clear this exam. In other words, I want to know if you think our best option is to pursue Outcome #1," said Ichinose.

"What the heck are you talking about? Isn't that obvious?" snapped Karuizawa.

Karuizawa didn't understand, but with that simple question, a hierarchy formed within the group. The dam had burst. Yukimura and a girl from Class C named Manabe followed suit. They agreed with Karuizawa and said they obviously wanted to cooperate. If everyone wished for it, we'd all pass the test with Outcome #1. A natural thing to say.

In response, one of the boys from Class B raised his hand. His blue, smooth hair swayed slightly. He was a thin, somewhat androgynous-looking young man who'd introduced himself as Hamaguchi Tetsuya. "I agree, of course. We're a group, and it's only natural for us to cooperate," said Tetsuya.

This had been a good way to start things off. If Ichinose's question sounded obvious to someone, that meant they weren't the VIP. The VIP would be forced to lie, while checking to see if they shared the group's feelings. If someone fell for it, then we could start narrowing down the list.

Of course, the situation wasn't that black and white. It would be dangerous to assume anything based on this one question alone. Ichinose had spoken first, and Karuizawa had agreed first. Yukimura and Manabe had followed her closely. Then came Hamaguchi from Class B. It wouldn't be surprising if one of them was the VIP. Boldly lying would divert suspicion, after all.

I decided to jump in. "I agree, too. We're a group, like you said, and we could all use some private points. If it's possible, I'd like us to work together. What do you say, Professor?"

The Professor, who'd been rubbing his swollen belly, recoiled in surprise when I called on him. "Of course I'll cooperate. I want points," he answered.

It seemed the Professor was still trying to play the part of "mysterious character," based on his answer. I'd never heard him use that tone of voice before. The only ones who looked doubtful were the Class A boys. They seemed to calmly analyze the situation, considering each individual member's opinion.

"Ichinose, that question was unfair, wouldn't you say? If you say something like, 'assume that no one here's the VIP,' aren't you subtly calling the VIP a villain? Besides, no normal person would announce that they're going to betray anyone."

Machida spoke these words with an air of suspicion. His response was clearly different from those of Classes D and C. Machida seemed doubtful of Ichinose, and ready to criticize her.

Hamaguchi calmly responded to Machida almost immediately. “Isn’t that a perfectly valid question, though? Ichinose-san didn’t threaten us. She didn’t order us to answer. If you don’t want to, you don’t have to respond,” he said.

Hamaguchi had coolly brushed aside all of Class A’s criticism. Apparently, a war of words was brewing. Machida wasn’t fazed by Hamaguchi at all. Rather, he spoke as though he’d expected it.

“That’s most certainly true. In that case, I think all of us from Class A will remain silent.” Machida crossed his arms. The other two people from Class A seemed to share his attitude. Everyone else who hadn’t yet answered decided to remain silent as well.

“Maybe that question was too harsh?” mused Ichinose. She smiled bitterly.

“No, I think that your question was valid, Ichinose-san. Their wariness is extreme. I’d like to ask you something, Machida-kun. What question do you think would be appropriate? I don’t think discussing our favorite foods or hobbies would be relevant to the exam. If you simply refuse to engage, then I’m unconvinced you can offer anything of value,” Hamaguchi said.

“Nothing to offer? That’s not the case at all,” said Machida.

“I don’t know specifically why Ichinose-san asked that question. However, this test requires us to come to a solution through discussion. If the students from Class A want to sit in silence, then we’ll have to carry on without you. At the very least, why not tell us what you think we should be discussing?”

Hamaguchi was right. Machida knew this, but kept his arms crossed and refused to answer. Ichinose looked like she was approaching a locked castle gate. She readied her verbal battering ram.

“I’d rather not do this, but think of it this way. Sometimes we may need to make decisions based on a majority vote. People will most certainly be suspicious of those who don’t want to answer the questions, and the group might turn against them. What do you say to that?” she asked.

Ichinose’s logic was similar to Horikita’s, but the crucial difference was that Ichinose could bring people together. Being able to take tactical action while also gaining the group’s approval demonstrated her powers of persuasion. Since most of the people in

this room were already on Ichinose's side, she was the *de facto* leader. It was deceptively simple. I didn't know of anyone else in our school who matched her talents. Not even Katsuragi or Ryuuen could do the same. Even Hirata and Kushida might find themselves outmatched, despite their overabundance of friends.

"Is that a threat?" asked Machida.

"Please don't misunderstand me. I just want to talk. You may answer however you please, but I want everyone to step up to the plate in this test. In other words, I want you to participate," said Ichinose.

Machida muttered to himself before snapping, "Will this test really be settled through discussion, though? Will you really discover the VIP through talking? Or are you going to bow your head and ask the VIP to help you?"

Apparently, Class A's policy had already been decided. But I didn't think that Machida himself held the power. I sensed someone else behind Machida, pulling the strings.

"Is there another way, then?" asked Ichinose. Nine times out of ten, there wouldn't be. But Class A had apparently been waiting for her to ask.

"There is. There's a way to clear this test easily, and come out on top," Machida replied without the slightest hesitation or anxiety. Ichinose and Hamaguchi couldn't hide their surprise.

"Would you mind enlightening us?" asked Ichinose.

"Of course. As a group, we ought to share valuable information," said Machida.

Machida's fake altruism didn't fool anyone. He was talking about a Class A strategy. Something extremely simple.

"I recommend that we don't discuss things at all," he said, speaking loudly enough for everyone to hear. Karuizawa and the Professor appeared to understand him easily enough.

"Well, that's a rather unique idea. How exactly will we come out on top without discussing things, though? Do you think we should let the VIP remain anonymous, and quit while we're ahead?" Hamaguchi spoke up, looking mildly irritated.

"Yes. The shortcut to victory is to avoid extraneous discussion," replied Machida.

"I can't believe this. If anything, I'm starting to believe that the VIP is someone from Class A. Are you just sharing information with the VIP and taking measures to protect him or her?" Hamaguchi

asked.

She had a point. Think about it. Let's say the VIP was someone in your class. If you gave away that information, discussion would be pointless. Hamaguchi's opinion was valid.

"It doesn't matter what class the VIP is in. You can most definitely win if you don't talk. That was Katsuragi-san's proposal."

"Katsuragi-kun? I see," said Ichinose.

As soon as Ichinose heard Katsuragi's name, she seemed to immediately understand. Machida politely explained in more detail to Yukimura and the others, who still didn't get it.

"There are only four possible outcomes. You all should know what those are. Consider. Which outcome do you think we should absolutely avoid?" asked Machida. He turned toward Karuizawa, as if choosing her to answer.

"Umm. The outcome where someone figures out the VIP's identity and then betrays the group?" she said.

"Exactly. If a traitor emerges, that will be our downfall. Whether the traitor discovers the person or not, we lose. But what if we flip things around?" asked Machida. This time, he looked to Yukimura.

"There won't be any negatives, you mean?"

"Exactly. There are no consequences in the two remaining outcomes. Our class points won't rise or fall much. However, we'd gain a lot of private points. The only one who suffers in this scenario is the school. So there's no need to try finding the VIP. If we talk, we'll start suspecting someone of being the VIP, and then someone might make a mistake," said Machida.

"I do see what you're saying. But if we don't know which class the VIP belongs to, the point gap between classes could be widened further. What if the VIP's identity is extremely biased, and all VIPs are only chosen from one or two classes? That class would get millions of points. Although our class points won't be affected, I'm sure everyone understands the importance of private points," responded Hamaguchi.

Hamaguchi was onto something. Private points were a hot commodity at our school. They could be used like pocket money, but also could purchase test grades. Depending on the situation, they gave you the power to do almost anything except move between classes. Hamaguchi asserted that as long as we didn't know how the VIPs were distributed between the classes, we shouldn't carry out such a strategy.

However, his argument wasn't really going to work for Class A.

After all, we were dealing with Katsuragi, who must have realized the test's "trick." Otherwise, he wouldn't have suggested this strategy.

"Think about it. The school wouldn't distribute the VIPs unfairly. They hate unfairness so much that they emphasized their commitment to fairness even before the test began. The fact that there is only one VIP in each group is not that important. What's important is that all classes have equal opportunity to produce VIPs. Otherwise, the test would be unfair right from the start. Is that possible? No, it's not. After all, the previous test on the island was fair, wasn't it? There's no doubt that Classes A through D are starting equally," Machida responded.

Katsuragi proposed that the VIPs had been distributed fairly amongst the groups. His plan was to let the test pass calmly so that all classes would receive the same number of points. However, Hamaguchi wasn't done.

"It's certainly true that the school has made a point of emphasizing its commitment to fairness. If we believe that, then you'd be right," he said.

The school probably wouldn't be so careless as to inadvertently favor one class. That much was easy to guess.

"So you understand it now. If we talk amongst ourselves, we create doubt, which will tear us apart. As a result, our relationship as a group will crumble. We certainly could discover the VIP, but that strategy could inspire a traitor who wants victory for him or herself. There's really no need for us to overthink things," said Machida.

"I suppose so. It's not a bad thing if the school is the only loser," replied Ichinose.

Ichinose seemed receptive to Katsuragi's strategy. Machida looked as if he'd expected her agreement, but Ichinose wasn't done.

"However, it's going to be unexpectedly difficult. It might even be more difficult than solving the test through discussion. If you don't doubt your partner, you won't betray him or her. All the first-year students would have to adhere to that. Because the school guarantees the VIP's anonymity, you're asking for trust amongst your classmates. It'd be great if the VIP stepped forward and the points were shared equally with the class, but couldn't the VIP just monopolize all of those points?"

"We in Class A have established complete trust amongst ourselves. We're not at all worried about that. Private issues ought to be solved by that private group," answered Machida.

Katsuragi's plan was to play defensively, almost like he was

putting up barriers. In order to pull off his strategy, he'd need the cooperation of everyone in the group, a difficult proposition. However, it really was a simple plan that anyone could pull off. All it required us to do was not talk. You could say that this strategy was a way to break the test.

"Isn't Class A's strategy fine, though? I cannot say that I can find any problems with it. Once the exam ends, the classes can talk amongst themselves and share the points," said the Professor.

The Professor, for some reason, had gone back to using his normal nerdy tone. Something must have resonated with what he said, because his sentiment spread to Class C. A girl named Manabe shared his opinion.

"I agree. Everyone sharing the same answer would be the most rewarding result, but if anyone lied or betrayed us, we'd be doomed. Finding the VIP just isn't realistic."

Yukimura was lost in thought, but didn't seem opposed to the idea. At least, he wasn't able to express an opinion. Conversation really posed a high degree of difficulty. Machida, feeling lessened resistance, smiled and showed off his white teeth.

"I see. So, do we agree it's as Machida-kun says? Each individual class can deal with the problem after the test has ended?" asked Ichinose.

Arms crossed, she looked over Classes D and C.

"I'd like everyone's opinions. Would that be all right? First, those who agree with the plan, please raise your hand."

Yukimura and the Professor raised their hands. All the students from Class C, looking somewhat troubled, raised their hands as well, though some took more time to think than others. Ibuki was the sole holdout, her arms crossed as they had been since the beginning of the test. She didn't move. She didn't speak.

"What about you, Ibuki-san? If it's all right, I'd like to hear your thoughts as well," said Ichinose.

"Whatever. I don't really have anything to add," said Ibuki.

She clearly stood apart from the other three Class C students. Manabe and the others didn't appear surprised by or suspicious of Ibuki. That must've just been how she acted normally.

"I see. Well, what about you, Karuizawa-san?" asked Ichinose.

"I… To be completely honest, I'm annoyed. Even though you say we'll get points, whether *I* get any points is a separate issue. But we may get points even if we do have a discussion… I don't want to

waste time fighting over what we're doing. I just want this test to be over so we can have fun."

The other students seemed astonished by her response.

"What about you, Hamaguchi-kun?" asked Ichinose.

"We leave everything to you, Ichinose-san," he replied.

It seemed like the trust Ichinose's class had in her was unshakeable. The other two students from Class B nodded in agreement.

"Thank you. Lastly, we have one more person to ask." Ichinose turned to me. "What do you think, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"I mean, the strategy's fine. Besides, I think most people here agree, and I've never been good at talking," I answered.

I promoted accepting the strategy. However, I doubted that Ichinose would just accept Katsuragi's plan so easily. No, if she just gave up and went with the flow, Class B would be headed toward a dark end. Katsuragi's strategy was hiding something.

"It's decided," said Machida.

"Wait. Machida-kun. Katsuragi-kun's strategy certainly isn't bad. With it, there's no need to doubt, lie to, or hurt anyone. In the end, we'd receive an equal number of points. I understand the reason why many would follow this plan. However, I want you to consider something carefully. I can't think of any downsides to this strategy, but wouldn't you say that being in Class A allows you to propose such a strategy? There may be downsides we don't see yet," she said.

Ichinose's comeback was swift and incredible. She was like a submarine everyone thought was deep underwater, only for it to suddenly surface without so much as a splash.

"A hidden downside? What in the world could that be?" asked Yukimura, sounding flustered. It didn't seem he'd considered that point yet.

"If we assume that the classes all have an equal number of VIPs, then I do certainly think it's possible to earn a large number of points equally across the board by not holding discussions. If that's true, this plan has only upsides. However, wouldn't it be unfair to the lower level classes to make them throw away this chance?"

"Well, that's—"

"We don't know how many special tests we'll have before graduation, and the difference between Class A and the rest is remarkably clear. Class A also proposed the extreme idea of aligning

all the classes back on the island. If Class A continues to recommend this strategy every time we have a test, our class positions will never change," Ichinose continued.

After Ichinose pointed out that fact, Yukimura's face visibly stiffened. It was like he wondered how he could have missed such a simple thing. Machida had cleverly constructed his proposal to focus everyone's attention only on the idea of "loss and gain." Yukimura had thought that option was better because he couldn't see the bigger picture.

"I can't just throw away a precious opportunity. Not even if your strategy yields solid results," said Ichinose.

"We agree with Ichinose-san," said Hamaguchi.

"Wait, Ichinose. I understand what you're trying to say, but if we follow along with what you're proposing, there'll be only one possible outcome. Only if everyone answers correctly will everyone in the group get a large number of points. The outcome you want isn't going to happen. Or do you intend to discover the VIP's identity through discussion, and then have Class B betray the rest of us? You just asked everyone if they wanted the first outcome. You aren't very trustworthy, wouldn't you say?" countered Machida.

"You said this wouldn't narrow the gap between classes, but that's not correct. There are four students from Class D, and four from Class C in our group. There are three from B and three from A. In other words, if we clear the test with the first outcome, it's possible for the lower classes to close the gap between themselves and the higher classes, wouldn't you agree?" she asked.

"That's true. But would B, a higher-level class, accept such a thing? There's no benefit to sacrificing your class so that the classes *below* gain something," Machida said.

"If we don't follow my strategy, we let Class A lead unopposed. It would be especially hard in the event that the VIP happened to be in Class A," responded Ichinose.

Of course, if the VIP wasn't in Class A, Ichinose wouldn't need to risk hurting her own class to deal a blow to Class A. However, if it was a possibility, she had to insist on establishing a dialogue.

"I agree. We can't allow Class A to keep securing the lead," added Yukimura.

Katsuragi's proposal had surprised me, but Ichinose and Hamaguchi's arguments made it seem like nothing more than a flustered attempt at a bluff—something they'd come up with on the spur of the moment. Ichinose's understanding of Class A allowed her

to turn things around with just a few words. The students who had once agreed with Class A's plan were now mostly either neutral or aligned with Ichinose. Classes C and D were now more likely to follow her. It was like a duel between Class B, led by Ichinose, and Class A, led by Machida. Right now, the tide was turning in favor of Class B.

"So, you oppose our proposal. Please remember that Class A has already committed to its decision. No matter what, we will discuss anything. You may talk amongst yourselves about whatever you wish," Machida answered.

As a demonstration of their separation, the three Class A students stood and went to the corner of the room. It looked like they planned to spend the rest of the time doing what they wanted. I was betting that the other Class A students in other groups were probably doing the same thing. Katsuragi's strategy was the ultimate defensive move: something that would keep all of Class A behind a gate. If a VIP happened to be in Class A, it would be exceptionally difficult to find him or her.

"Now then, what should we do?" Ichinose faced the other three classes, who were still sitting around in a circle. "I wanted to avoid excluding anyone, but there's nothing we can do if that's your class policy. If you want to participate, just let me know," she said gently.

However, the Class A students had already lost interest.

"Isn't it going to be impossible to find the VIP without their help?" asked Yukimura, flustered by the sudden change. It sounded like he was complaining to Ichinose.

His attitude had changed from a few moments ago, when he was ready to go along with the more convenient Class A plan. Even Yukimura had wanted to avoid Class D getting the short end of the stick.

"Yes. If Rabbit's VIP is in Class A, trying to narrow down the list of suspects won't be easy. But in terms of sheer probability, there's a three in four chance that the VIP's in one of the other classes. Besides, even if we don't know *who* the VIP is, if we at least know *where* that person is, we'll have some options. Right?" asked Ichinose.

She didn't seem focused on finding the VIP right off the bat. Instead, she wanted to first narrow down which class the VIP was in. At least, she wanted to know for sure if he or she was in Class A.

"Well, since they won't talk to us, this is going to be difficult. However, if the VIP does happen to be in one of the other three classes, I think everything should be fine even if they don't out themselves. However, if the VIP's in Class A, what do you think we

should do?" Ichinose was boldly striking back against Katsuragi's strategy. She was trying to form an alliance.

"I can't trust you," muttered Yukimura.

After Yukimura rejected the offer, Manabe from Class C spoke up and also refused Ichinose's plan. "Even if the VIP's in Class A, would we be able to identify them? Wouldn't that be difficult?" she asked.

"I don't think it's necessary for us to think that far ahead. Let's just start by finding out which class the VIP is in," replied Ichinose.

From the VIP's perspective, three classes coming together to find you was probably terrifying. If they were on their own, or if they had a friend from another class, they really should consider the idea of cooperating with the search in order to blend in.

"This is just a spur-of-the-moment idea. If we work together, we'll come up with even better ideas later. The test's only just begun. I think it might be better to wait a bit and take our time before deciding whose plan we'll move forward with," Ichinose added.

Those who'd rejected both Machida's and Ichinose's plans had no third option. As Hamaguchi had said, it wasn't fair for people to complain without first suggesting a plan themselves. At any rate, I decided to lay low until I saw how others acted. People with low communication skills tended to be highly reactive; they'd act before thinking. I couldn't afford to get impatient.

"Hey, you're Karuizawa-san, right? There's something I wanted to ask you," said Manabe.

Karuizawa quickly looked up from her phone screen. She hadn't expected anyone to talk to her. "What?" she asked.

"I might be mistaken, but…did you have a fight with Rika earlier in the summer?"

"Huh? What are you talking about? Who's Rika?" asked Karuizawa.

"She's a girl from our class who wears glasses. She has her hair up in a bun, like a dango. Remember her?"

"I don't know her. Maybe you're thinking of someone else."

Karuizawa lowered her eyes back to her phone, as if deciding this conversation had nothing to do with her. However, the next words out of Manabe's mouth changed things.

"Isn't that strange, though? I'm sure we heard about it. We heard that Rika was bulled by a Class D girl named Karuizawa. Rika told us you cut in line and pushed her aside when she was waiting at the

café."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Like, do you have some kind of problem with me?" asked Karuizawa.

"No, not really. I'm just checking to see if it's true. If it *is* true, though, I'd like you to apologize. Rika is the kind of girl to bottle everything up and stay quiet, so it's up to us to help her deal with situations like this."

Apparently Karuizawa had a reputation as a troublemaker outside our class as well. Class C was hard to deal with as a whole, so this made for big trouble ahead. Karuizawa decided to ignore Manabe. Manabe, looking frustrated, turned her phone's camera toward Karuizawa.

"You won't mind if we check with Rika then, will you? I mean, if it wasn't you, Karuizawa-san, then there won't be any problem, right?" asked Manabe.

Karuizawa looked up and knocked the phone out of Manabe's hands. She must have done it more forcefully than she thought, because Manabe's phone tumbled to the ground, spinning as it fell.

"What the hell?!" shouted Manabe.

"That's what *I* should be saying! Don't just take pictures of me without permission. I already told you that you had the wrong person," Karuizawa snapped.

Both sides claimed the other was wrong. The conflict was heating up. Ichinose watched it unfold, a bystander. It was as if she was trying to determine who was right and wrong.

"What'll you do if my phone's broken?" shouted Manabe.

"I don't know! Just ask the school for a new one," answered Karuizawa.

"I have some really precious photos stored on that phone, though."

After hurriedly picking up her phone, Manabe glared at Karuizawa with resentment. Two of the other Class C students, who'd been watching the situation unfold, came to help Manabe stare Karuizawa down.

"What? Are you saying *I'm* the bad guy here?" asked Karuizawa.

"If it wasn't you, you wouldn't get all angry and deny it like that, right? Let us take your picture," said Manabe.

"But I don't want you to."

I thought that Karuizawa would've answered Manabe more

forcefully, but her words were surprisingly weak. Or rather, there was some fear mixed in with her "tough girl" act. It might've been my imagination, though.

"Perhaps the reason you're denying it so much is because it's true?" asked Manabe.

Manabe pointed her phone's camera at Karuizawa, as if intending to forcefully take her picture. The other two girls from Class C laughed like they were enjoying it. However, Ibuki didn't share their sentiment. She looked scornfully over at Manabe, showing her contempt.

"Stupid," said Ibuki.

"'Stupid'? What? This has nothing to do with you, Ibuki-san. You're not friends with Rika, after all."

"That's right. This absolutely has nothing to do with me. So I said what I thought as an outsider."

Ibuki crossed her arms and looked away. Manabe didn't appear to care for Ibuki's attitude at all, but did not confront her. There was probably a clearly established hierarchy in Class C, and Ibuki was above Manabe.

"Anyway, just let me take your picture!" shouted Manabe.

"No, I don't want you to! Come on. Please, say something to her," Karuizawa pleaded. For some reason, she turned to Machida, begging him to intervene. "I won't forgive you if you take my picture without permission. What do you think, Machida-kun?"

"I agree. Manabe, Karuizawa has told you that she doesn't want you to take her picture. Stop it," Machida added.

"M-Machida-kun, this has nothing to do with you," answered Manabe.

"From what I've heard just now, I think you're the one in the wrong here, Manabe. Karuizawa told you she doesn't know what you're talking about, so it's wrong for you to forcefully take her picture. Don't you agree? I think it's best to talk to your friend again and confirm if the story is true."

Judging this situation fairly, Machida was correct. I certainly understood Manabe's feelings in wanting to take the picture to ascertain the truth, but if the person tells you no, taking a picture without permission is rude. Confronted with that argument, Manabe and the other girls had no choice but to back down, though Manabe didn't seem wholly convinced.

"Come on, lay off me. Thank you, Machida-kun," said

Karuizawa.

Karuizawa looked up at him, her eyes full of gratitude. Even though the Class A students had distanced themselves from the rest of the group, they weren't bad guys at all. Takemoto and the others didn't appear to be too interested, though.

"All I did was the right thing." Machida blushed slightly.

Perhaps this was the beginning of a new love? Karuizawa already had Hirata, though. Regardless, I got the feeling that the friction between Karuizawa and those Class C students would spark some real problems down the road.

3.2

In the end nothing was settled, but at least we'd spent the hour in discussion like we were asked to. The announcement came that we were free to go. The students from Class A all gathered together and left right away.

"Well, you're free to do whatever you like," they told us.

After they'd marched out the door, silence enveloped the room once again. Ichinose had dismissed Katsuragi's strategy, but hadn't managed to reach a new resolution. Was she hiding something else up her sleeve? Or was she thinking of something else, perhaps? *Let's see what you've got, Ichinose.*

"Well, we have five more discussion periods left. How about we bring this session to a close?" Ichinose spoke kindly.

The consensus seemed to be that it was better to spend some time on our own before meeting up again to discuss. We'd all taken in quite a bit of information and hadn't had the time to process just yet. At the very least, the Class D members were exhausted. The Class C students seemed to be in the same boat.

"Well, I'm going to head back—Aaah?!"

Karuizawa, completely exhausted, got up to leave but accidentally pitched forward. Perhaps her legs were numb from sitting for so long.

"Ouch!" shouted Manabe.

In a panic, Karuizawa had attempted to correct her footing, but staggered and stepped on Manabe's foot.

"Ah, I didn't mean to do that. I'm sorry," Karuizawa mumbled, apologizing quickly before leaving the room.

"Hey, what the hell?!" shouted Manabe. She yelled at the rest of us as we left. I didn't want to get caught in the middle of anything, so I averted my eyes and got out of there.

"Well, we're heading back, too. I want to talk to Hirata about some things," I said.

The other classes were already making their moves. Yukimura seemed like he wanted to hurry up and start a discussion about our own strategy. To be honest, our class didn't boast a ton of competent planners, so it was a difficult decision. The Professor stood up slowly. In the end, the last people left in the room were the three Class B students and Ibuki.

“I’m hungry again. I wonder if there’s a lunch buffet,” mused the Professor.

How could he already be hungry again? *What kind of body lets you digest all that food in just an hour?! Besides, if you eat that much, you’ll get fat.* I kind of doubted that my heartfelt advice would reach him, though.

“Hey, Yukimura. Wasn’t Karuizawa acting strangely?” I asked.

“She’s always acting strangely,” he replied.

Well, that was a straightforward and honest response, but not exactly what I wanted to hear. I wasn’t sure what, but something felt off about her. Maybe I didn’t really know her at all…

The Professor didn’t seem to have noticed anything in particular. In fact, he forgot it’d even happened. My phone had been turned off in the room so I wouldn’t be distracted. I turned it back on as we left, and noticed an instant message from Sakura. She wanted to meet if we had time.

“Hmm. Perfect timing,” I murmured.

I wanted opinions from people other than Hirata and Horikita. I wanted to hear what they thought about this strange test. I’d probably gain insight after learning more about Sakura’s group.

“Let’s see, where should we meet?” I asked aloud.

I thought the same place as yesterday should be fine. When I pitched that idea to Sakura, I immediately received a confirmation. There were going to be lots of students around right now, but they probably wouldn’t pay any attention to us. Loners learned the art of dealing with crowds.

Since the first group discussion had just ended, the elevator was going to be intensely crowded. Because only about ten people could ride at a given time, it’d be faster to just take the stairs. I made my way toward the deck. On the way, I received a new instant message:

Since there are so many people around, I’m going to head to the bow instead. I’m sorry.

“Ah. Guess she couldn’t deal with the crowds after all.”

I made my way toward the bow. The ship’s interior had many luxurious facilities, but toward the bow there was only a large deck, which provided a good view of the water. Because of that, it was usually quiet. There didn’t seem to be anyone else around, which meant I had the entire deck to myself. Sakura was waiting for me, standing behind a pillar in the corner. Deciding not to shout in case I spooked her, I approached slowly.

“I was thinking about it, but…h-how do I do it?” she murmured out loud.

Hmm? As I drew nearer, I heard Sakura muttering to herself. She spoke in a quiet voice, and it was hard to hear her over the wind. I couldn’t make out what she was saying too well.

“I-I…wanted to…d-d-d-da…” she stammered.

I thought she might be talking to someone, but there was no one else around. She didn’t seem to have her cell phone out, either, so the whole thing was a little creepy.

“Sakura? What’s the matter?” I asked, trying not to surprise her.

“Aaaieeeeeeeeeeee!” Sakura yelped, practically jumping out of her own skin. Seemed like I’d surprised her after all. “Wh-wh-when did you get here? How much did you hear?” she asked frantically.

“I didn’t really hear anything. I just got here now.”

No one else was around. She was like a frightened little animal.

Had Sakura been talking to a ghost, or had she lost her mind? I wasn’t sure which.

“Were you listening?! Did you hear what I was saying?!” Sakura shouted.

“I only heard bits and pieces. I have no idea what you were talking about,” I said.

Sakura appeared relieved.

“So, why did you call me out here?” I asked.

“Um, well. You see, it’s…ah… I was s-stressing out over the test!” she shouted.

Sakura, looking incredibly depressed, handed me a list. I read over the names written on it.

CLASS A: Sawada Yasumi, Shimizu Naoki, Nishi Haruka, Yoshida Kenta

CLASS B: Kobashi Yume, Ninomiya Yui, Watanabe Norihito

CLASS C: Tokitou Hiroya, Nomura Yuuji, Yashima Mariko

CLASS D: Ike Kanji, Sakura Airi, Sudou Ken, Matsushita Chiaki

It looked like the other Class D students assigned to the Cow group were…intense. Considering the boys in her group, like Sudou and Ike, I couldn’t help but feel sympathy for Sakura. During this test, you had to spend time with the other members of your group no matter what. I’d have liked to help her out a little bit, but there was nothing I could really do. Once it was time for the groups to come together, we had to be part of our teams. We couldn’t afford to be scattered. I *could* help her secretly, but if I acted unnaturally during the test, someone would immediately notice. In a test like this, breaking the rules could mean death.

“I thought I might know someone from another class but… amazingly enough, I don’t know anyone. No one who would remotely consider me a friend,” said Sakura.

I tried thinking about it, but the only people who could help were Ichinose and Kanzaki. But since Ichinose was already in my group, she was stuck. I couldn’t really leave it to Sudou or Ike to take care of Sakura, either.

“Sorry. I don’t really have any friends, either,” I said.

“Ah, it’s okay. You don’t need to apologize. It’s just that…I don’t have *any* friends!” Sakura responded.

This was a pathetic conversation, the two of us competing to see who was worse off. Rather than take pride in our lack of friends, I changed topics. “By the way, there was something I wanted to ask you, Sakura.”

“Huh? Me? What is it?”

“Has Yamauchi gotten in touch with you at all since the discussion ended?”

“Yamauchi-kun? No, he hasn’t. Is something the matter?” she asked.

“Ah, I see.”

During the test on the island, I’d indirectly used Sakura while I was also using Horikita. I’d manipulated Yamauchi by taking advantage of his crush on Sakura, promising him Sakura’s email address. Of course, I hadn’t intended to give Yamauchi her email address without her permission, but I hadn’t talked to him about it yet. I was worried that he might’ve reached out to Sakura in the aftermath, but apparently it was all right. Since I’d planted the seeds myself, if Yamauchi made a move, I would have to act.

“For the time being, contact me if something’s bothering you. You can tell me anything,” I said.

“Is that okay?” asked Sakura.

“Yeah. That’s the least I can do.”

Even though I didn’t know how much help I’d be, Sakura’s eyes sparkled like a child’s. Maybe she was just glad to be able to talk to someone.

“I’ll definitely contact you!” she said.

“S-sure,” I responded.

Sakura was a little different from her usual self. She was overjoyed, and had a bit more vigor behind her words than usual. Maybe she was becoming a little more assertive or something? Even though only a few days had passed since the test on the island, Sakura was developing quickly. It had been an insane test, but maybe it changed her life in unexpected ways. She hadn’t transformed completely, but I sensed she had learned to stay positive and keep going in a tough situation.

"Aaaaaaayaaaaaanooooookooooouuuuujiiiiii!"

As soon as I went back inside the ship, a shadow loomed over me. I felt hands grabbing me, and the mystery assailant tightened his grip on my neck. I frantically tapped his arms, but he showed no sign of loosening his grip. I thought that was it for me for a moment. After I shook myself free, I quickly turned around and saw the face of my attacker. It was Yamauchi Haruki, looking like some sort of oni or an asura.

"Wh-what's the matter?" I knew the reason, but asked as a formality.

"'What's the matter' my ass! You said you'd tell me Sakura's email address, for chrissakes! And you were talking with Sakura just now! I knew it. You were after her all along!" he shouted.

Apparently, my luck was terrible. I needed to think of something. "I never meant to go after her. Well, this is kind of hard to say, but…I lied to you before," I croaked.

"Wait. You lied?"

"Do you really think that a loner like me would know Sakura's email address?" I turned toward him, trying to show my sincerity.

"So… Wait, so just now you were trying to ask Sakura for her email address?"

When I nodded, Yamauchi looked shocked and fell to his knees.

"So… You didn't know her email address at all, Ayanokouji. You *lied* to me?" he sputtered.

"Yeah. Sorry."

"So how'd it go? Did you get Sakura's email address?"

"Er, sorry."

"Sorry? What does that mean? I'm not looking for an apology, I'm looking for her email!" Yamauchi muttered to himself, reflecting the depth of his disappointment. "How are you… How dare you trick me!" he shouted.

I did feel bad for tricking him, certainly, but I couldn't give him Sakura's contact information without her consent. Since he had obvious ulterior motives, I really had to refuse. "Can you give me just a little more time?" I asked.

"More time?! 'Show me a liar and I will show you a thief'!" he

shouted.

I never would've expected a Class D student to throw out a proverb like that. I was shocked. "Then are you going to make Sakura tell you?" I asked.

"Yeah, that's right."

He was probably blinded by anger. It seemed like he intended to get Sakura's contact information by force, if necessary.

"You know, Sakura said she hates guys that are all talk."

"You mean guys like *you*, Ayanokouji?!" he shouted.

"Of course she hates me. But it should be obvious why I couldn't give you her contact information. I don't want you to make the same mistake I did, Yamauchi. If you forcibly asked her, it wouldn't go anywhere. It'd be pointless."

"You're just making excuses. You never knew her info in the first place." Yamauchi lowered his head.

"Yeah. And I'm sorry. But I know for sure that she doesn't hate you," I answered.

"But what the hell should I do?" he asked.

"Did you know that Sakura loves digital cameras? I've heard that her camera doesn't work, and she doesn't have enough points to buy a new one. But what if you got one for her, Yamauchi? If you gave it to her as a present?" I asked.

"Oh, she'd be happy, for sure, but…I don't have any points, either."

"Well, there a few options in this special test. If you were the VIP and managed to make it through without being found out, or if you became a traitor and sold out your group, or if you managed to guide your group to clear the test, you'd get enough points to buy tons of digital cameras. Right?"

"So if I do my best, there's a chance I can get a new camera for Sakura?" he asked.

Yamauchi was about to burst. He could see the solution to his problems.

"Now, Yamauchi Haruki, you need to achieve real results. Work hard, and show Sakura how manly you are. Only then would you be a guy who deserves to go out with a former idol."

Whatever his ultimate goal, Yamauchi clearly had a crush on Sakura. If I gave him the right stimulus, he could unearth greater potential.

“I’ll do it, I’ll do it, I’ll do it, I’ll do it! I’ll give it everything I’ve got and win Sakura!” he shouted.

“That’s right, Yamauchi. You can definitely do it.”

“Yeah! I’m definitely going to win!” he shouted.

I’d managed to redirect his energy into participating in the test. If he didn’t get anything out of this, his bitterness and rage might return toward me, but this was a temporary fix. Well, if we managed to secure a surprise victory, everything would be fine…though if Yamauchi was too fired up, he might let the target slip past him. I worried that he could miss the VIP completely.

“Let me tell you something, just in case…” I started. I wanted to urge Yamauchi to be careful, but then refrained from doing so.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing. Just do your best. But if you find the VIP, don’t let the other classes beat you to the punch, okay?”

“Of course.”

If Yamauchi missed the target by mistake, that would probably be fine. The bigger picture was more important than the short term, anyway.

3.4

Because only Class A had been promised advancement into higher education or employment upon graduation, we'd never gain their cooperation. Classes B and D had joined hands to defeat Classes C and A, so Classes C and A had likely formed an alliance to defeat us in return. What would happen when the classes came together? It would be dangerous, like putting carnivores and herbivores together in the same cage. It was almost impossible to organize such a group. If people with strong character like Hirata and Ichinose took the lead, it might work. Even then, it would be absurdly challenging.

Class A didn't participate in the discussion during our second gathering, either. Of course, with one class absent, we couldn't really speak frankly, so we had to kill time. I was interested in how students from the other classes would act, but the instability already had everyone holding their breath. We were all so on guard that it was impossible to be candid.

"Well, this is the second time we've gathered like this. Don't you think we should start having open, honest conversation? We'll only meet so many times," reasoned Ichinose.

Of course, Ichinose had taken the lead and got things moving. As expected, she wished for peace. Hamaguchi and the other Class B students were exactly like that, too. They were ready to make alliances without hesitation. It was like how Hirata operated. They were similar, but still fundamentally different. Ichinose and her friends should have been striving for a Class B victory.

Last time, people were flippant, but now things had changed. The atmosphere was oppressively gloomy. Everyone was jumping at shadows and incredibly wary. However, the three Class A students weren't bothered by anything, freely tapping away on their phones. There wasn't any rule against contacting other groups, after all. They could even talk on the phone.

Well, the old saying was true: the rich are rich, and the poor, poor. Class A was winning the interclass competition by a landslide, so they had no reason to be worried. I thought their loss during the test on the island would've changed them, but Katsuragi had them maintaining their calm image. It was an exceptionally effective strategy.

Anyway, it wasn't going to be easy for a lone wolf like me to break down Class A's walls.

“I don’t think we need a breakthrough right now, but we do need a discussion. Class A might be breaking away from this test, but I think we need to pinpoint the VIP,” said Yukimura.

Yukimura’s words helped motivate us somewhat. If the VIP was in another class, we couldn’t afford to let this chance slip by. Or perhaps he was the target, and Yukimura was suggesting this as an attempt at camouflage.

“But can we really find the VIP by talking? I just don’t think we can. It’s just, like, this test is so unfair. It’s too hard. The VIP has way too much of an advantage,” said Karuizawa.

“I understand, Karuizawa-san. But doesn’t that just depend on your point of view? I mean, the test on the island was also a surprise to the students,” said Yukimura.

“Sunrise?” Karuizawa looked puzzled.

“If it’s Sunrise, leave it to me! That’s my specialty. I’m fired up!” shouted the Professor.

No, I thought. *No, they said “surprise,” not “Sunrise.”*

“You know, life on a ship’s not bad. It’s really fun, right? Even though we have to get together twice a day, we’re still free to chat and use our phones. It’s not like class,” said Ichinose.

“Well, yeah. It *is* pretty fun,” said Karuizawa.

“Right? So, that’s why we need to get more comfortable. We need to talk like we’re all friends. Don’t you think it’s hard, putting up walls like that? Machida-kun and the others always look so stern, you know?”

Ichinose had a point. This was all an issue of perception. If you stayed positive, the test would be easier.

Machida, who’d been listening to Ichinose’s optimism, let out a snicker. “You’re free to do whatever you want, but you probably won’t find the VIP. I don’t know who the VIP of our group is, but if the VIP doesn’t share information, they may be devising a way to gain points for themselves. They’re probably staying hidden on purpose. Besides, the VIP might be in Class B, right? How can you trust these guys?” he asked.

He was trying to shake us all up.

“But couldn’t I say the same thing of you, Machida-kun? Can you really trust *your* allies?” asked Ichinose.

“Of course I can.”

Machida looked at the student next to him, named Morishige.

However, he quickly focused again on Ichinose, projecting the usual calm, Class A image.

"We have no reason to fuss over finding the VIP. We have more than 100,000 points deposited into our accounts every month. No one in our class would lie just to get a mere 500,000."

"Really? You know what they say: An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Are you trying to tell me that no one in your class would want even one extra point? It's not like the school will be bothered if you get more," replied Ichinose.

"That's stupid. Go ahead and keep being delusional. You're just grasping at straws."

Ichinose smiled at Machida. She'd certainly gotten a response out of him. Even though Machida said he wouldn't participate in the discussion, he'd taken Ichinose's bait. If he started talking, we might pull information out of him. By using Yukimura and Karuizawa, Ichinose had started collecting information. The only problem was, when would Machida notice her ploy?

Karuizawa sighed and went back to fiddling with her phone. While there wasn't any rule prohibiting phone use during the test, doing so while we were trying to find the VIP was a little rude. Or maybe she was like the CIA or FBI, communicating with Hirata in real time so he could listen to our conversation? I'd respect her if that were true, but it probably wasn't the case.

Of course, knowing that Karuizawa didn't usually put serious effort into anything, this wasn't out of character. But something felt off. It felt like something had been off ever since the test started. Karuizawa; the reunion with Ibuki; confronting Manabe.

I realized that none of the things she'd been doing lately seemed like the "usual" Karuizawa. She was a strong presence in Class D. Whatever her reputation, she and Hirata often brought the class together. But here, she was practically a background character. She had the potential to motivate others, and she wasn't using it. When someone spoke to her, she would answer and then immediately shrink away. Hirata was always Hirata, no matter the situation, and Kushida was always Kushida. However, that didn't seem to be true for Karuizawa.

If I were to create a hierarchy for the group, she'd be below Manabe and the other Class C girls. Maybe that's why she was acting strangely. My doubts and suspicions slowly grew.

For Class D to reach a higher position, we didn't just need to increase our points. We needed to create a system in which we *could*

increase points. In comparison to Classes A and B, Class D lacked cohesion. And for that exact reason, Karuizawa Kei was irreplaceable. She controlled the rest of the Class D girls. That's why I was worried about her behavior. I'd thought she'd be more aggressive and dominate the field.

I needed to determine if she was useful or not. Considering that the test period was rather short, I couldn't afford to take things slow. I needed to stir the pot, even if it meant being forceful.

The Class A students immediately left the room at the hour's end. They were sticking to their class plan and staying quiet for the remaining four discussions. As Ichinose watched the students leave, she gave a heavy sigh.

"Hmm. I suppose this is going to be tough. What do you think, Ayanokouji-kun?"

Ichinose turned to me. She was even calmer, wittier, and clear-headed than I had previously thought. She noticed that I kept quiet during these discussions, but didn't put me on the spot. If I had been her classmate, I would've had a crush on her. She was just that charming. The Class B guys probably weren't alone in falling for her; she had to have admirers from other classes, too. She probably rivaled Kushida in terms of popularity.

"To be perfectly honest, I'm the type to just sit things out. I'm just a bystander," I said.

"It's far too soon to give up. Let's work hard together!" Ichinose seemed determined to do her best.

"Well, even if we keep having these discussions, I don't think anyone will come out and say they're the VIP. The benefits of staying hidden are just too great, same as the downsides for being discovered. At this rate, Class A's worst-case scenario prediction will probably come true," said Ichinose.

Though her comments sounded negative, she looked fearless. Whatever I felt about her, she was clearly always ready for a challenge.

"At any rate, we're done for today. Good work, you two."

"No, we didn't do much of anything. Well, shall we?" said Hamaguchi.

The change was immediate. The three Class B students relaxed, almost as if someone had flipped their switches to OFF. I still didn't really know what the deal with them was. I didn't understand what Ichinose's and her group's aims were yet.

Of course, she might have some kind of strategy that she couldn't tell anyone outside of her group. When Manabe and the others from Class C got up to leave, I trailed after them. Once they reached the elevator, I meekly called out.

"Hey. Do you have a minute?"

Manabe looked slightly on her guard, probably because she hadn't expected me to come after her.

"I heard about your problem with Karuizawa. Something about her pushing someone at the café, right?"

"Yeah. Why do you ask?" snapped Manabe.

These girls wouldn't normally want to chat with me, but that topic seemed to interest them. All three focused on me, like they were checking me out.

"I'm not 100% sure, but I think I saw Karuizawa fight with a girl from another class," I said.

"That's… Are you sure?" asked Manabe. Her voice was stiff, and she drew nearer. I shrunk slightly and nodded.

"I think so. Well, I just kind of got this bad vibe, you know? I felt like she was acting like a jerk, so I thought I'd go ahead and tell you."

I kept it vague to set things in motion, and then turned and went back the way I came. Honestly, I hadn't actually seen anything. If I'd kept talking, I would have probably been exposed as a liar. Now that the fuse was lit, Manabe and the others would react. How would the newly docile Karuizawa respond? I wanted to find out.

3.5

I headed back to my room. It was late, so I sat down on my bed without talking to anyone. It was getting close to midnight. I'd thought that everyone would be asleep already, but Hirata looked at me anxiously, like he'd been worried. Yukimura sat on the sofa and faced me.

"Good work today, Ayanokouji-kun. You're rather late," said Hirata.

"Yeah, a bit. Ah, that reminds me. I wanted to talk to you for a minute, if you have the time."

"I'm sure you're tired, but if you're up for it, do you mind talking with me?" he asked.

Hirata and I asked each other the same thing at the same time.

"Huh? What did you want to ask me?" said Hirata.

"Oh no, that's okay. You go first, Hirata. We can talk about my thing later."

Yukimura was trembling, like he was on edge. He probably wanted to talk about the test, too. I changed into my jersey and rejoined them. Hirata moved a bit to give me some space on the sofa. I wanted to talk to Hirata about Sakayanagi, since I figured such a popular guy would likely have information. But I didn't mind waiting.

"I just chatted a bit with Yukimura-kun. We decided to share information about the test," said Hirata.

"I did say that it was pointless to include you, Ayanokouji," added Kouenji. How nice.

"I would've been glad if Kouenji-kun participated, but he unfortunately declined," said Hirata.

Yeah. I couldn't imagine Kouenji teaming up with anyone.

"Sorry, Hirata Boy. I'm far too busy with the pursuit of physical beauty."

Kouenji, naked from the waist up, was doing push-ups. He was soaked with sweat, but didn't seem bothered at all. No ordinary high school student could pull that off. He really was exceptional in every way. Honestly, I wondered if Kouenji was even participating in this test. Hirata seemed to guess my thoughts.

"Kouenji *is* participating in a group. After all, students are required to participate, and points are taken away if a student fails to

participate," said Hirata.

Trust Hirata to read the rules thoroughly.

"To tell you the truth, I got word that two of our classmates have been selected as the VIPs in their groups," he whispered.

"What? Who?" I asked.

"That's… I can't say. They only told me because they trust me."

"So you can't trust us, Hirata? If you know, then I have the right to know, too. Besides, if you know who a VIP is, that might give us some kind of hint. We should all be sharing information with each other in the first place. It's only natural, after all," said Yukimura.

"Yes, you're right. That's why I wanted to consult with you. It's just that—" Hirata started.

"Hey, Hirata. Wouldn't it be better to give us that information by phone? We don't know who's listening in on our conversations," I said.

"Yeah, you're right. Wait just a moment."

Two names showed up on Hirata's phone. He turned the screen to us.

"*Dragon Group, Kushida-san. Horse Group, Minami-kun."*

Immediately after I saw the names, Hirata erased them.

"I see," murmured Yukimura. He was careful not to say too much.

So Kushida was the VIP. Having that position in the extremely well-stacked Dragon group meant they had an enormous advantage. However, being the VIP was terrifying. Once they knew her identity, she was at their mercy. If the VIP had been from another class, we wouldn't have taken the brunt of the damage even in the worst-case scenario.

"Don't worry. Everything is all right," said Hirata.

He'd noticed I was worried. The three Class D people in the Dragon group were the best we had to offer. They'd never be careless enough to reveal the VIP's identity.

"Speaking of Rabbit Group, it's equally possible for the VIP to be from any of the four classes. So in Class D, there are two VIPs that we know about. There should be one more VIP keeping his or her identity secret," said Yukimura.

"Yeah. I think your logic follows. They certainly haven't talked to me about it, but they might've consulted someone else. After all,

there's a high risk of being discovered if you talk," Hirata said.

While we talked amongst ourselves, Kouenji started humming. Yukimura, who'd been patient up until that point, bolted out of his chair in frustration.

"Kouenji, stop the happy-go-lucky act already! I'm not going to tell you to take things seriously, but you need to at least participate. We don't want you to screw everything up like you did back on the island," he shouted.

"Well, I couldn't exactly help it. I was in awful shape. I couldn't force myself to do the impossible," answered Kouenji.

"You just faked being ill to get out of it!"

"My, this test will be nothing but troublesome, wouldn't you say?" Kouenji sniffed.

He continued his push-ups, then stood gracefully. He grabbed the towel from his bed and started wiping his neck.

"Troublesome? You're not even thinking about this test at all!" countered Yukimura.

"Well, there isn't any point to continuing a test that isn't interesting, is there? Finding a liar is simple."

Kouenji, phone in hand, started to fiddle around. Soon after, all four of us, including Kouenji, received a notification from the school on our phones.

"What did you just do, Kouenji?!" shouted Yukimura.

Hirata and I read over the email we'd just received from the school.

"The test has now ended for the Monkey group. Those in the Monkey group are no longer required to participate any further. Please do not disturb the other students."

"Monkey Group? Hey, that's *your* group, Kouenji!" shouted Yukimura.

"Of course. And now, I finally have my freedom once again. Adieu."

He tossed his phone aside before slipping into the bathroom. The rest of us were simply dumbstruck.

"Y-you've got to be kidding me! We're desperately trying to think of a way out of this, and that guy, he just…"

"We still don't know anything yet. He probably had his own ideas," replied Hirata.

“You’re being way too generous! That guy will screw anyone over, so long as he’s able to enjoy himself and take it easy. This sucks!” shouted Yukimura.

Well, Kouenji didn’t take the test seriously at all. That was true. However, he was remarkably perceptive and observant. He had boldly stated that the test was nothing more than a “simple quiz” to find the liar. If that were true, he’d probably hit the mark.

Kouenji’s sudden actions soon became known to the rest of the students. Hirata’s phone started to beep continuously as new notifications poured in. Classmates were desperate to know what’d happened. Katsuragi, Ryuuen, and Ichinose would all be surprised by this. Probably no one had imagined that someone would turn traitor so soon. Horikita messaged me:

I’m sorry. Things seem really confusing right now. I’m going to give you a call.

“Damn it. Thanks to Kouenji, things have escalated,” said Yukimura.

“I’m stepping out for a bit,” I said.

Yukimura seemed like he was so irritated he wouldn’t be able to sleep. I stepped out of the room. Even though the test had ended for Kouenji, I couldn’t dwell on that. To be honest, I was seeing my own limitations in this test. No matter how much I schemed, it would be extremely tough to lead the Class D students from all the remaining groups to victory. You could even say it was impossible.

If the students came together, we could do something. Otherwise, we were beyond help. We had no connection. You couldn’t interfere with another group’s answers using your own phone. There wasn’t enough time to find another method, and the risk was high. If I had some information that could decisively turn everything around, that would be another matter. The ringleaders were Hirata and Kushida. If I could use them…

“It’s impossible,” I muttered. There were three days left. Even if I did manage to gain their cooperation, I still didn’t have enough eyes and ears. I needed to understand what was going on in each group’s discussions. Of course, I might still be able to use Horikita and Sakura, but…

Well. Right now, I needed to get more eyes and ears on my side.

3.6

The starry skies stretched out before me as far as the eye could see. I wandered around, and stumbled onto the deck.

"Wow, that's amazing."

The view was more beautiful than anything I had seen in a movie or envisioned in a book. It was the kind of sky you couldn't see in a large city. There were a few couples holding hands, looking up to the stars shoulder-to-shoulder. I felt a little lonely. Because there was almost no light, I couldn't make out their faces, but I didn't particularly care. I wasn't interested in other people's romances.

But amongst all the couples, there was one student looking up at the starry skies alone. A girl, judging by the silhouette.

I couldn't just walk up and say something like, "Why don't we look at the stars together?" I'd probably come off sounding like one of those sleazy pick-up artists. Besides, if a boyfriend came along and joined her in the middle of me making a move, it would be bad. But part of me was interested in discovering her identity. I tried getting a little closer.

The girl turned toward me.

"Huh? Oh, Ayanokouji…kun?"

"That voice… Kushida?"

Kushida stepped out of the shadows. She looked at me with an expression of shock.

"Are you…alone?" I asked. Perhaps she was waiting to meet her boyfriend. Just imagining that made my chest tighten and ache.

"Yeah, I am. I just couldn't seem to sleep."

"I-I see," I answered.

Well, now I knew she wasn't on a starlit date. In that case, I figured she wouldn't mind, so I got closer. Kushida wore a jersey. She must have just gotten out of the bath, because she smelled nice. It should have been the scent from the complimentary shampoos in our rooms, but it wasn't. How mysterious.

"Aren't you cold?" I asked.

"I'm fine. What about you, Ayanokouji-kun? Are you all alone?"

I nodded. When I did so, Kushida laughed happily.

"So we're both alone? I admit, I felt a little ashamed being alone.

This makes me feel better."

"…"

I should've spouted off a witty one-liner. But I couldn't. Besides, being alone with Kushida in a place with a ton of couples spiked my heart rate. Deep down, though, Kushida must've been thinking how much she hated this.

"Well, I'm gonna head on back," I said.

"You're already leaving?"

"I'm getting tired." That was a total lie. I didn't want to sleep in the slightest.

"I see. Well, I'll see you tomorrow. Good night, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Good night, Kushida."

I turned around and began to make a pathetic retreat.

"Wait!"

Unexpectedly, Kushida wrapped her arms around my chest. Even in this cold, I felt the warmth of her body through her jersey.

"K-K-Ku…Kushida? Wh-what's the matter?" I squeaked.

Of course, I was completely flustered. It was only natural that I'd panic. I couldn't understand what was happening.

"…"

But Kushida didn't answer right away. She finally responded in a small voice.

"I'm sorry. I…I just felt so lonely, I think," she whispered. Her words hit me hard, like a fighter smacking me right in the jaw. I felt dizzy. Kushida buried her face in my chest for a few seconds longer, without saying a word. Then she pulled away, flustered, as if breaking from a spell.

“S-sorry. I, um…I just hugged you so suddenly, Ayanokouji-kun. Good night!” she stammered.

I couldn’t make out Kushida’s face too well in the dark, but she might have been blushing slightly. Kushida quickly scurried away before I could speak. I stood there, hand on my chest, feeling the warmth that remained. I already couldn’t sleep, and after all that, I couldn’t just return to my room. I decided to wander around the boat before heading back.

“Now that I’ve calmed down, I’m feeling thirsty.”

There should’ve been a few vending machines on the first level, so I decided to head there. But as I approached, I found an odd three-person group: Chabashira-sensei; the Class B homeroom teacher, Hoshinomiya-sensei; and Mashima-sensei from Class A.

The teachers were relaxing on the sofa. The area wasn’t technically off limits to students, but since things like izakaya and bars weren’t open to us, no one came around. I’d taken this route just for a change of scene, but had stumbled onto an opportunity. I hid myself and drew nearer.

“You know, it’s been a long time since the three of us all got together.”

“It is what it is. Fate. After bouncing around from one thing to the next, we all chose the teacher’s life.”

“Enough. There’s no point talking about that.”

“Ah, that reminds me. You were on a date the other day, weren’t you? You’ve got a new girlfriend, huh? Mashima-kun, you’re quite the playboy. And here I’d thought you were the quiet, unsociable type.”

“Chie, what happened to the man you were with?”

“Ah ha ha! We broke up two weeks ago. I’m the type of girl who breaks it off once the relationship starts getting serious. It’s just like, see ya later!” Hoshinomiya-sensei said.

“That’s what you’d usually hear from the guy.”

“Ah, but I’d never do that to *you*, Mashima-kun. You’re my best friend, after all. I’d hate to ruin our friendship.”

“Relax. I’m not worried about that.”

“What a shocker.”

Hoshinomiya-sensei poured whiskey into an empty glass. She downed it in one gulp. Must’ve been a drinker. On the other hand, Chabashira-sensei sipped her drink like a cocktail.

“What are you planning, Chie?”

“Huh? What are you talking about? What’d I do?”

“It’s customary to place all of the class representatives into the Dragon group, isn’t it?”

“I’m not screwing around or anything. It’s certainly true that as far as grades and attitude are concerned, Ichinose-san is number one. However, someone’s true place in society cannot be measured by numbers alone. I determined that she needed a challenge. And besides, rabbits are just so cute, aren’t they? The way they hop around. Doesn’t that suit Ichinose-san?” Hoshinomiya-sensei asked.

“I hope you’re right.”

“I think what you’re saying makes sense, Hoshinomiya, but what are you getting at?”

“We wouldn’t want you to base your judgment on personal grudges.”

“Oh, are you still talking about what happened ten years ago? I thought that was all water under the bridge.”

“I wonder. I mean, you can’t seem to stop yourself from running your mouth. You’re not satisfied unless you’re one move ahead. That’s why you put Ichinose in the Rabbit group, isn’t it?”

“I genuinely thought that Ichinose needed to learn a lesson, so I removed her from the Dragon group. You know? By the way, Sae-chan, I couldn’t help but notice you’ve been focusing on Ayanokouji-kun. Anyway, it’s just a coincidence. Coincidence, coincidence. When the island test ended and Ayanokouji-kun became a kind of leader, you weren’t surprised at all, were you?”

“I see.” Mashima-sensei nodded as though convinced of something. However, he then strictly addressed Hoshinomiya-sensei. “There’s no rule against this, but I want to be clear. Stop spying on other colleagues’ classes.”

“Agh, it’s like you don’t trust me at all. Well, I’m not the only one to blame. Sakagami-sensei is part of the problem, too. If we evaluated the Class C students properly, another student should’ve been placed into Dragon. But they threw Ryuuen in there.”

“That’s certainly true. This isn’t your average year. The students seem rather special.”

With this newfound information, it was about time for me to head back. If I stayed any longer, I might be seen. Just knowing that Ichinose had been sent to spy on me was enough for this little reconnaissance. Apparently I was under heavy scrutiny.

Chapter 4:
Double Question

"You're joking, right?"

The first thing out of Horikita's mouth sounded very accusatory.

"Unfortunately, it's the truth. Kouenji just ended the test for his group," I said.

"Are you an idiot? Why didn't you stop him? Wasn't that your responsibility as his roommate?" she asked.

"That's an impossible task. Besides, there's nothing I can do about it now. No use crying over spilt milk."

Kouenji's treasonous act had circulated around the ship, and naturally the classes were in an uproar. Even though we'd chatted yesterday, Horikita wanted to meet face-to-face today. She seemed unconvinced by my words, because she was still shaking her head.

"When I see him next time, I'll reprimand him myself. I'll make him beg for mercy."

"You already know that's pointless, right? He won't listen. He'll just confuse you and waste your time. It'll be a headache. For the time being, we should concentrate on our own groups."

She'd keep blaming me for Kouenji because he was my roommate. I decided to change the subject.

"It's true that my group is filled with troublesome opponents, but I've no intention of falling behind," said Horikita.

She certainly had an iron will. Well, I supposed I would have to leave the matter to her. I had problems of my own, specifically with Ichinose and the others who'd been secretly sent by Hoshinomiya-sensei to spy on me.

"I was thinking. You're a girl, more or less. I wanted to ask you something," I said.

"I really don't like the way you said that. 'More or less'? I *am* a girl."

Horikita had misunderstood what I'd meant. She looked disgruntled, and turned away from me.

"Oh, uh, that's not really what I meant. I meant there was something I wanted to ask you, *as* a girl." Since she'd probably get angrier no matter what I did, I cut to the chase. "I want information

on Karuizawa."

I'd planned to contact Karuizawa, but had never talked to her before. If Karuizawa ranked the boys in our class, I likely would've been last.

"You want to talk to *me* about Karuizawa?"

"Yes, exactly." I nodded. "I'd like to know more about the people in my group, but it's not easy. I should be able find out whatever I need to about the Professor and Yukimura, but I'm at a complete loss with Karuizawa. After the test on the island ended, Karuizawa invited you out to lunch. Right?"

"I turned her down, though. You know that. I have no interest in Karuizawa-san. If you want information on her, why not talk to Hirata-kun? If he's helping you, you'll be able to contact her easily."

That was certainly true. Unfortunately, prior to the test, I had *also* passed on the opportunity to have lunch with Karuizawa. Hirata probably remembered that, so I wanted to avoid asking him about this.

"Do you think she's the VIP? Is that what you're worried about?" Horikita asked.

"There's that. But more than that, I can't understand Karuizawa's behavior. That's why I'm worried."

"Well, isn't that none of your business? Besides, her behavior isn't logical. I think it's a waste of time," she countered.

"Horikita, I don't think it's good to write people off like that."

"Write them off? What are you talking about?"

"You and Karuizawa don't get along at all because you're both willful, so you see her as nothing more than a nuisance. You understand that she may also have strong points, too?"

"*She* has strong points? I can't really imagine any. Isn't she just flawed?"

In terms of cooperativeness, Horikita was probably at the same level or even worse than Karuizawa.

"When you first see someone, you make judgments based on their appearance. You might determine if someone is cool or cute, for instance. Basically, you read people. Call it your first impression; that's simple enough. Next, you learn about their inner self through conversation and seeing them in action. You'll see whether they're sociable, belligerent, passive, etc."

Horikita crossed her arms, acting like my words were obvious.

She waited for me to continue.

"But that's still just as superficial as their outside appearance. Their innermost thoughts aren't going to be immediately apparent from that. For example, take Kushida, Ibuki, or even me. There's a difference between a person's outer and inner selves."

"So Karuizawa has some secret self?"

"Almost everyone does. They may not be aware of it themselves. You do, too." Whenever she came face to face with her older brother, she exposed her fragility.

"I'm still not entirely convinced. However, I imagine you'll learn more about her by spending time together," she said.

Of course, that was easier said than done.

"So, what are Karuizawa-san's good points?" Horikita asked.

"I still can't really describe it, but so far I'd say it's her ability to assume control. She can take the initiative. In fact, her position in Class D is unshakeable."

However, in the Rabbit group, that part of her stayed hidden, which exactly why I needed to uncover Karuizawa's true nature as quickly as possible.

"Okay. Let's say for the sake of argument that you're right, and she has that ability. What do you intend to do? Are you thinking of making her your ally, too?" asked Horikita.

"Hmm, I have to think about that."

While I thought about how to answer, Ryuuen approached us. "Hey, you two. Having yourselves a nice date in the shade? Let me in on the fun."

He wasn't with Ibuki, apparently. He drew closer to us, wearing a creepy smile.

"It seems like you have an awful lot of free time. Not that I care, but there's nothing for you here," said Horikita.

"That's for me to decide. Well then, have you decided how to find the VIP?" he asked. Ryuuen sat down without bothering to ask permission.

"Whatever my plans may be, I've no intention of telling you," said Horikita.

"That's too bad. I wanted to get your opinion. However, it looks like you haven't made any progress at all in your search."

"That's an interesting thing to say. Are you saying that *you* know

who the VIP is?"

Ryuuen smirked slightly at Horikita, as if expecting her to express disbelief. "I've already started to discover the VIP's identity. Would you believe me if I told you that?"

"No, I wouldn't. You don't have any support like Ichinose-san and Katsuragi-kun do. You only have enemies. I can't imagine you have reliable information," she countered.

"Well, you're right that I'm not a professional friend-collector, but making friends has nothing to do with whether or not I can gather information." He spoke like a teacher rebuking his student for not getting the correct answer. "Unfortunately for you, I've already gotten a handle on the fundamentals of this test. Depending on how things go, Class C will win by an overwhelming majority."

"No, you can't be…"

No, what he was saying was probably true. The school always created tests with fundamental laws or rules at their core. That was true of our midterms, final exams, and even the test on the island. If you understood the logic behind those rules, it would be possible to win. This test was likely no different. He must have noticed that.

"It's an extremely simple matter. All you need to do is find out what class the VIP is from. Then, your next move is to analyze the group," said Ryuuen.

"I see. Anyone could think of that. But are they going to answer honestly? If the school has a rule that guarantees your anonymity, all they need to do is lie and gain 500,000 points, right?" Horikita countered.

Ryuuen appeared calm in the face of Horikita's doubts. "You just have to make sure it's a situation where someone *can't* lie," he said.

"Where someone can't lie?"

"I take everyone's cell phones. So if someone lies to me, all I have to do is check everyone's email, one by one," said Ryuuen.

"Are you insane? The school doesn't allow that. If you were discovered, you'd be expelled," snapped Horikita.

"It's not really a problem at all, actually. I'm here *because* it's not a problem. Do you get what I mean?"

It was a brute-force method that only he could pull off, because he was an absolute tyrant. If he forcibly looked at another student's phone, then Ryuuen would be punished. However, even if Ryuuen rampaged through Class C, he believed no one would lodge a complaint against him. And if no one complained to the school, that

meant they were practically giving him consent.

Ryuuen's calm proved that what he said was true—that he was operating within the rules. His strategy was to forcibly lay bare all of Class C's secrets. At any rate, if what he was saying was true, Ryuuen had identified three of the VIPs. That was a huge step toward completing this test.

It was comparable to a quiz where you could turn the page over and find the answer written on the back. If you didn't flip the page, no one would know the answer, but if you flipped it just a little, you could spy the answer. In other words, Ryuuen probably knew the identities of every class's VIP.

"Looks like you finally understand."

"Yes. But you haven't got the answer yet. If you had, you would've sent an email to the school immediately," answered Horikita.

"Maybe I'm just playing around?"

"You don't know when someone else is going to figure it out. You shouldn't be so laid-back," Horikita snapped.

She didn't have any proof, but Horikita was probably correct. If he already knew the answer, there'd be no benefit to delaying the result. He should have ended it.

"Now, then. Suppose I'm about to reach checkmate?" he said.

"Ryuuen-kun. While you're here, I'd like to ask you something. The test ended for the Monkey group yesterday. What do you think about that?" she asked.

"I don't think about it at all. I don't really care about small fry. See you again, Suzune."

Ryuuen left. His parting words made me wonder if he planned on reporting back regularly. I flipped him off, and Horikita made a face.

"I don't know how much of what he said is true," she said.

While we kept silent, we peeked underneath the chair that Ryuuen had been sitting in. Under the chair was a single cell phone set to record audio. A single chat message had been sent to that phone. There was no sound because the phone had been set to silent. I couldn't see everything on the screen because of the angle, but I instantly made out the words "Sorry for yesterday!"

Perhaps there was some kind of drama in their class? I didn't want to court disaster by continuing to look, so I sat back up. Horikita

quickly understood, took out her own phone, and sent me a short message:

If that phone is his, we probably shouldn't say anything careless.

Well, she wasn't wrong, but who knew what the correct answer was? This was difficult, but it would also be suspicious for us to just go silent.

"Do you think what Ryuuen said was true? About finding out the VIPs from every class," I said.

Horikita looked perplexed for a moment. However, she seemed to quickly pick up on what I was getting at.

"I have to wonder. I can't say I'm 100% sure. But…there's a possibility. I don't think we can keep up this test much longer, though."

"Sounds like things are rough for you, too," I said.

"I've got a lot of work for you to do. I need you to find the group's VIP as soon as possible," said Horikita.

"Easy for you to say. It's not like *I* can find them."

"I won't expect too much from you. I just want information about the Rabbit group."

Our conversation only highlighted Horikita's capability and my incompetence. That way, suspicion would probably be directed away from me. At any rate, Ryuuen was using his own phone to try and find out more. He was looking for anything he could get.

"If you're not expecting too much, I'll do what I can," I answered.

Without saying anything else, Horikita got up, walked to the elevator, and left. Should I head back to my own room? Or should I come up with a strategy to win the test? I left Ryuuen's phone alone and walked away. Eventually, I decided to head back to my own room. I could learn more detailed information about Horikita's group from Hirata, more or less. Also, Hirata would likely approach this test from a different perspective than Horikita.

However, Hirata wasn't in the room when I came in. I only saw Yukimura. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, looking grave.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

He was my roommate, after all, so I couldn't just ignore him. Yukimura noticed me, but he didn't respond. He sighed quietly and muttered something to himself.

"For crying out loud, why did we get stuck with this group? Why

am I partnered with Karuizawa and Sotomura? We can't win," he mumbled.

"What's with you all of a sudden?" I asked.

"Didn't you hear? There's a rumor going around saying that they use guidelines to create the groups. When I heard that all the superior students got grouped into the Dragon group, I knew it was true," he answered.

So that's what he was agonizing over. It was certainly true that the Dragon group did seem to feature the best of the best. Considering the conversation I'd overheard between the teachers and what Ryuuen had said, there wasn't any doubt. Based on pure academic ability, Yukimura certainly wasn't inferior to Hirata or Horikita. He was probably dissatisfied at being placed in the Rabbit group, which was stuck somewhere in the middle.

Yukimura didn't use a certain person's name, but when he looked at me it was clear he was thinking about Horikita. Unfortunately, I couldn't help him. While I continued listening to him, I returned to my bed and laid down on my side. I thought I'd take a nap until Hirata returned.

Unfortunately, I felt a disagreeable gaze on me. Yukimura stared at me suspiciously.

"Ayanokouji. You aren't the VIP, are you?" he asked.

"Even if I did deny it and said you're wrong, what's the point in checking?"

"Cooperation is vital in this test. We need to adhere to that. If we cooperate, we won't lose."

"I see. Unfortunately, I'm not the VIP."

"Are you sure? You're not being selfish and trying to hoard points, are you?" Yukimura seemed to doubt everyone as a rule, so this didn't surprise me.

"I'm not the VIP. Can I believe that you're not the VIP, Yukimura?"

"Yes, of course you can. I'm not the VIP. Neither is Sotomura, by the way."

That was sort of like a secret handshake, a magic contract between allies.

"I checked with Karuizawa, too. She said that she's not the VIP, but whether I believe her is another issue."

Yukimura normally showed disdain for Karuizawa, so he tended

not to believe what she said. He'd know the truth for sure if he checked her phone, but given that they had a tenuous relationship, that would be difficult. You could say their relationship was the embodiment of "good fences make good neighbors." They liked to keep their distance. They wouldn't flaunt their good fortune to one another.

Yukimura seemed satisfied for the time being, because he didn't press the matter any further. I laid my head on my pillow and closed my eyes. I couldn't really relax with someone else in the room, but it wasn't too unpleasant. When I really focused on trying to make friends, I could be as adaptive as a chameleon, and it seemed even Yukimura was starting to warm up to me.

I fell into a light sleep, punctuated by Yukimura's occasional sighs.

4.1

In the afternoon, I went to the Rabbit group's discussion room. Despite the fact that it was a bright, sunny day, the atmosphere could completely change depending on the company. I arrived ten minutes before the discussion was set to begin and appeared to be the first one there. The next to arrive was Karuizawa. When she saw me, her expression changed to one of apparent disgust, and she quickly averted her eyes. After that, she moved as far away from me as she could and sat down. She took out her phone and started fiddling with it.

We didn't exactly get along. We didn't really fight, though. She simply disliked me. But that was actually the most bothersome kind of relationship. If she disliked me for a reason, there was room for improvement. However, if she just instinctively hated me, then there was no chance of a breakthrough.

I could've killed time out in the hall until Ichinose and the others arrived, but since I was here first, it would look awkward if I left. I decided to adjust my posture to look more manly and dignified. What a bother this test was. Because it centered around conversation, you *had* to participate no matter what, which was difficult for me. Even after the first semester ended, I still couldn't bring myself to strike up a conversation.

Karuizawa didn't seem like she planned to pass the time quietly. She put her phone to her ear and started talking. "Oh hi, Rinocchi? How are things with you right now? Me? Ah, things here suck so bad. Like, I'm seriously fed up with everything," said Karuizawa.

Since we were the only two people in the room, I could naturally overhear every bit of Karuizawa's conversation, including how she skillfully wove together expressions of both joy and melancholy. It was an incredibly awkward situation with only two people in the room. Immediately after her call ended, there came a moment of silence.

"That reminds me. So, are you the VIP? It seems like… Yukimura-kun and that Soto…kun aren't," said Karuizawa.

Wow, she was talking to me. At least she could remember Sotomura's name. Yukimura had asked me that same question a little while ago. I suppose it made sense that everyone wanted to check.

"Nope," I answered.

"Ah, okay. That's fine."

However, unlike Yukimura, she didn't double-check. "Do you believe me?" I asked.

"Huh? You said you're not, didn't you?"

Even though we didn't get along well, she seemed to believe what I said. Well, there really wasn't any need to press the issue. I wasn't looking to get more points in this test. What was important was ascertaining whether Karuizawa could be useful to me.

"You two sure are early," said Ichinose. The three Class B students had arrived together.

"Nice to see you," I said. I raised my hand slightly. Ichinose spoke to Karuizawa as well, but Karuizawa was so busy on her phone,

she didn't respond.

Everyone in our group showed up before the start time. However, the situation hadn't changed at all from yesterday.

Class A kept its distance from the rest of us, so the rest of us formed a circle. Then, Karuizawa got up and sat down next to Machida from Class A. Probably a defensive measure against Manabe. Machida didn't participate in the discussion, but we felt his presence very strongly. There was also a power imbalance, and Class C, which only had girls like Manabe, didn't really have any charismatic members who could go up against Machida.

Had Karuizawa instead gone to someone weak, like me or the Professor, for support, Manabe and the others could have hounded her. Karuizawa had definitely made the correct decision.

"Don't worry. If anything happens, I'll help you," said Machida.

"Thank you, Machida-kun," she replied.

Since Karuizawa had started depending on Machida, he seemed very conscious of her. I mean, she was a really cute girl, so it was understandable that he'd want to protect her. Even if they were from different classes.

Leaving aside their new (and dangerous) affections, the test was the problem. We all understood that. We understood that what separated victory from defeat was finding out whether your class had the VIP.

"Now then. I'm sure we all discussed this amongst ourselves last night, but I think we should try and find the VIPs after all," said Ichinose.

"This again? Don't you get that some people here won't go along with it? If we don't all participate, there's no way you'll find the VIP," said one of the Class A students mockingly.

"I don't think that's true, though. It's a problem of trust. That's why today, I'd like us all to play cards together. Of course, I won't force anyone to participate. Only jump in if you want to," said Ichinose.

She brought out a deck of cards, all while smiling.

"Ha ha ha ha! Building trust through playing cards? That's so stupid!"

"You can say it's stupid, but if you give it a try you might like it. Besides, spending an hour in complete silence sounds awfully boring. Why not kill some time?"

Of course, all the other Class B students agreed to participate.

"I shall play as well. I am currently at liberty," said the Professor.

Well, the Professor was right. We didn't have anything else to do right now. No one else was joining, so I slowly raised my hand.

"Five people, then. Well, I thought we could play *Daifugō*, but does anyone here not know the rules?" asked Ichinose.

I had a grasp on the rules, to a certain extent. I knew about *Daifugō*. No one seemed to have a problem, so we got into a small circle and started playing. The people not playing either chatted amongst themselves, or occasionally shot us an indifferent glance. Ichinose shuffled the deck and divided the cards evenly among the five of us.

I had a Joker, a pair of twos, and three other cards. Considering the hand I'd been dealt, I could've seemingly overwhelmed the others, but the winner isn't always the one with the strongest hand. The smallest upset could weaken your hand, and then you'd be defeated.

However, I clearly had the superior hand. I needed a solid strategy to make use of the cards. This game was more profound than I'd expected. Also, everyone's idiosyncrasies were on clear display. Ichinose didn't just concentrate on her own hand; she played her opponents' as well. Hamaguchi focused on the endgame. He also got rather worked up at times, like the Professor.

"Once more!"

I would've thought that the Professor, who was a huge otaku, would be relatively calm. But when it came to games, he was the type to get fired up easily. At least he was also the type to cool off quickly, since he calmed down as soon as the game ended.

This was probably what Ichinose wanted to see. By learning the unique characteristics of our group, she would know how to talk to them. It wasn't much, but considering that talking was useless at present, it was effective. It also meant that Ichinose was observing my behavior, just as I'd observed the Professor.

I wondered how I looked from Ichinose's perspective. From an objective perspective, I probably looked dull. I pushed ahead when I had a good hand, but turned passive when the situation went downhill. A common kind of person. However, rather than forcibly changing the way I played and confusing Ichinose, it was probably better for me to be consistent. I continued the game as I normally would. We started off playing *Daifugō*, and played about five games before switching to Old Maid. The hour passed. In the end, neither

Class A nor Class C joined in, so the five of us played from beginning to end.

"Heh, my my, that was quite enjoyable. Playing a traditional game on occasion is no bad thing," said the Professor. He seemed to have enjoyed spending the hour playing games rather than talking. However, even after this session of psychological revelation, I still couldn't understand Class B's true plan. Only Ichinose had that information.

"Well, I suppose I'll be going now," said Ichinose.

"Where are you going?" asked Hamaguchi.

"I can't let Class A just get away from us like this."

"You're going to see Katsuragi-kun, then?"

So. Ichinose intended to confront the man who'd devised Class A's "castle gate" strategy. Even though I wasn't a fundamentally social person, I knew I should take advantage of this.

"If you don't mind, can I go along with you?" I asked.

"Hmm? Sure, that's fine with me. Do you want to talk to Katsuragi-kun, too, Ayanokouji?" asked Ichinose. She didn't seem wary of me. Rather, she looked simply curious. She tilted her head.

"No, that's not it. Horikita's in the same group as Katsuragi."

"Ah, okay. Well then, let's go together. See you later, Hamaguchi-kun," said Ichinose.

Hamaguchi nodded and watched us walk off. Even though Ichinose had taken the lead, they all seemed to respect one another. That wasn't at all the type of relationship that Katsuragi and Ryuuen had with their subjects.

If the group discussions were happening at the same time, then each group would be breaking up at about the same time, too. Ichinose walked quickly, hoping to arrive before the Dragon group dispersed.

"Let's hurry," she said.

Ichinose picked up the pace. At least the rooms were all on the same deck, so it wasn't too long a walk. Since the discussion had only just ended, there was a scattering of students in the hall. Soon, we arrived at the Dragon group's room.

We couldn't hear any voices, but we got the sense that people were still in the room. We stopped right outside the door. They might still be talking in there. I sent Horikita an instant message, but I didn't think she read it.

“Looks like they’re really taking their time,” said Ichinose.

“I can’t imagine Ryuuen and Katsuragi holding a discussion. Maybe Class B is showing off their power?”

“I’m not sure about that. Kanzaki-kun isn’t the type to take the spotlight. On that note, you have Horikita-san in there with some others from your class, right? She’s a star player in the Class D line-up.”

Horikita, Hirata, and Kushida were all star players. Ten minutes passed until, finally, the door opened. The first person to exit the room was Ichinose’s target, Katsuragi. Other Class A students trailed behind him. Katsuragi immediately noticed Ichinose.

“Ichinose? What are you doing here?”

“I’d like to talk to you, Katsuragi-kun. Do you have a minute?”

“Well, the testing period *is* three days long. I have several minutes available.”

He didn’t ignore Ichinose. Rather, he looked happy to engage with her. The other Class A students understood and continued on their way.

“It’s fine if I stay behind alone, yes?” he asked.

Ichinose nodded. They moved out of the way of passersby. I somehow managed to remain in the conversation, so I stood close to Ichinose. From Katsuragi’s perspective, I was nothing more than a single spectator. He didn’t say anything about me being there.

“I think I know what you’re planning, Katsuragi-kun. You ordered your classmates to refuse to participate in discussions, yes? Would you possibly reconsider? We need communication to get through this test, after all.”

In the three discussions we’d had so far, the Class A students had passed the time in complete silence. Ichinose couldn’t break down those walls on her own. She needed someone to lower the castle gate and let her in. Now, what would be Katsuragi’s response?

“That’s extremely reasonable. But I’ve heard this question so many times that I feel like my ears are going to fall off. Unfortunately, Ichinose, you’ve wasted your time,” said Katsuragi.

Apparently Katsuragi’s strategy had gotten a lot of attention.

“I have my own situation to deal with. Katsuragi-kun. I don’t think forcing people to be quiet is a good strategy. Would you reconsider?”

Katsuragi, who’d probably been answering the same questions to

multiple classes over and over, went straight to the heart of the matter.

"The answer will always be the same. I developed that strategy to win. My reasons are good. You think this test requires communication. That's why you don't agree with me, but you're wrong. This test is about *thinking*. If you miss that, it's a big problem. So, in keeping with the theme of the test, I've decided to stifle discussion."

"But, Katsuragi-kun, your idea is basically a rejection of the test itself," countered Ichinose.

"What I've said might sound bad, but it's not. I'm looking out for my class, looking for ways to not only preserve our standing in this test, but in tests to come. Do you agree that there's nothing wrong with me protecting my class?"

"If this test were a direct competition between the classes, sure. I'd agree. But in this test, when all the classes are blended together, do you really think that's right?" asked Ichinose.

But Katsuragi's opinion *was* correct. There were four possible outcomes in this test. As long as you chose one of those outcomes, it was legitimate. Katsuragi wasn't interested in small intergroup competitions; he was solely focused on maintaining Class A's lead.

"Any further discussion is meaningless, Ichinose. You can't change my mind," he said.

"So. Like the old saying goes, an immovable object meets an irresistible force?" Ichinose wore a wry, pained smile as she rubbed the back of her head. She didn't appear disappointed, but she probably understood there was no budging Katsuragi.

"Do you still intend to fight?" asked Katsuragi.

"Of course. This is a test," answered Ichinose.

Ichinose and Katsuragi—two powerful, influential forces—were facing off against each other.

"I'm sorry, but the result's a foregone conclusion. If Class A doesn't participate, there's not much you can do. There shouldn't be any way for you to win," said Katsuragi.

Even if the three other classes were united, winning wouldn't be easy. If they discovered the identity of the VIP, anyone could become a traitor. As long as the potential traitor stood to gain something, it'd be difficult to maintain cooperation until the bitter end. If the reward wasn't distributed evenly, there'd be no reason to cooperate.

"I want to ask you one thing. If you were Class A's leader, what

would you do? Wouldn't you implement the same strategy?" asked Katsuragi.

"Hmm…I wonder. Well, I can't really consider things from Class A's perspective. If you're being chased, I imagine it would be better to have experience with chasing. Always running is pretty tough, isn't it?" asked Ichinose.

Katsuragi closed his eyes and crossed his arms, as if dismissing her words. He then met Ichinose's gaze once again.

"In my opinion, if you were standing in my position, you would've come up with the same strategy I did. If it's to protect my class, I don't particularly mind being criticized by others." Katsuragi locked eyes with Ichinose.

In response, Ichinose smiled softly. "I'm sorry for taking up your time. I think I understand now. Understand your thoughts and ideas, I mean," she said.

"I'm glad to hear that. Well, if you'll excuse me."

Ichinose watched Katsuragi leave.

"This test is easier if you're playing defense. I guess I'll have to do even more," she mused.

The lower classes were frantically fumbling around for hints, but that was risky. If you missed the VIP, you'd let down the rest of the class.

"Anyway, Kanzaki-kun and the others haven't come out yet," she said.

Only Katsuragi and the other Class A students had shown themselves. So far, no one else had left the room. One hour was the minimum requirement, but it was okay to discuss things further.

"Are you going to wait for Kanzaki?" I asked.

"You're waiting for Horikita-san, right? I wanted to ask her something, too. Let's wait together."

She could talk to Kanzaki whenever, but her chances to speak with Horikita were probably limited. Since Katsuragi had brushed her off, Ichinose probably wanted to gather opinions from the other classes. But I couldn't see how she was planning to break through Katsuragi's strategy.

We waited for nearly thirty minutes until, finally, the door opened. All of the Class C students left, except for Ryuuen. Kushida and Hirata came out next.

"Huh? Ayanokouji-kun, what are you doing here? Are you

waiting for Horikita-san?" asked Kushida.

Kushida approached me, looking puzzled. I remembered the scene from yesterday and quickly stiffened. Unfortunately, Kushida seemed to have gone back to her usual self, as though nothing had changed.

"Hello, Kushida-san."

"Oh! Ichinose-san! Hello. Now, this is odd. Well, I should say I didn't expect to see the two of you together," said Kushida.

Apparently Kushida didn't know that Ichinose and I knew one another. She couldn't hide her surprise.

"We're waiting for Horikita-san and Kanzaki-kun. Are they still talking?" asked Ichinose.

"Oh, those two. They're still discussing things with Ryuuen-kun right now. Maybe you could step inside?" Kushida gestured toward the door, as if inviting us in.

"Oh no, it's all right. If they're still in the middle of something, we can wait."

"Oh, I think it's fine. Besides, the test period is only one hour. Any time after that, we're free to come and go as we please. Besides, they may not be talking about the test."

Kushida opened the door and called us in. Ichinose and I couldn't refuse her invitation, so we entered. Hirata and I briefly exchanged looks as we passed each other. Inside, Horikita, Kanzaki, and Ryuuen were sitting slightly apart from one another. It was a three-way deadlock.

Although the mood wasn't necessarily tense, it wasn't relaxed, either. As we entered, everyone turned their attention toward us. Horikita and Kanzaki didn't change their expressions, but Ryuuen chuckled, as if we amused him. Then, he raised his hand to Ichinose.

"Yo. Did you come all the way here to do some reconnaissance? Don't be shy. Take a seat."

"This is a rather interesting group. I want to know what you're all talking about, especially since the required hour is up," said Ichinose.

"Heh. Ah, of course you do. Originally, I thought you would have taken Kanzaki's place in here. But you ended up in a different group. What's more, you got shoved into a completely hopeless, hapless group. Or maybe you are a hopeless, hapless kind of person," said Ryuuen.

“Come on, Ryuuen-kun. You know that we can’t understand the school’s strategies. We’re just doing our best with the information we have and the situation we were placed into. But it sounds like you think there’s a reasoning behind the group formations. Do you think the school had some kind of plan in mind?” asked Ichinose.

Ichinose pretended she hadn’t noticed anything, but Ryuuen wasn’t the type to believe a woman so easily. Chuckling slightly, he drew closer to Ichinose. He didn’t pay any attention to me. Well, that was okay by me.

“If you haven’t realized it yet, I’ll explain it to you. The teachers intentionally decided how the groups would be divided. It’s obvious, don’t you think? If so, that means you were put into the losers’ group despite being at the head of Class B,” Ryuuen said. “There has to be a reason.”

“Hmm. So it wasn’t random? They deliberately chose how to split us up? I noticed that *your* group is full of exceptionally gifted people, Ryuuen, but I suppose the other groups were all made for a reason as well. Thank you for the helpful advice. But should you really give me so much information?” asked Ichinose.

She responded as promptly as expected. I noticed Ryuuen’s face change, though. Normally, when confronted with surprising new information, a person expresses shock, confusion, or perhaps even doubt. However, Ichinose looked completely calm, and thanked Ryuuen for the advice. Not a normal response.

Of course, she might have been purposefully hiding something. Considering how bright and lively Ichinose normally was, you might think she was incapable of deception. I didn’t know how intuitive Ryuuen might be, but he likely recognized that something was going on. It was a brief conversation, but both parties seemed to gain quite a bit of information.

In any case, what Ichinose did or didn’t know about the school’s plans wasn’t really important. What *was* important was that she was staying quiet about it. Ichinose and Ryuuen were trying to get a read on each other.

“Even so…” Ryuuen, looking exasperated, turned to me. “You know, I love chasing skirts, but you’re on another level. First Suzune, now Ichinose. You’re always sniffing around some chick, aren’t you?” he said.

I couldn’t exactly deny what he was saying. Besides, Ryuuen probably wasn’t all that interested in me, since he didn’t say anything more.

“Well, you’ve come at a good time, Ichinose. I have an interesting proposal for you,” said Ryuuen.

“A proposal? I suppose I’ll hear you out. What is it?”

“It’s completely stupid. Listening to him would just be a waste of time.” Horikita must have already heard this proposal, because she was quick to urge Ichinose to reject it.

“A proposal to crush Class A. I don’t think that’s such a bad plan. Suzune and Kanzaki seem to disagree, though,” said Ryuuen.

“What do you mean?” asked Ichinose.

“I told Suzune this earlier, but I already know all of the identities of the VIPs from Class C.”

There it was. Just as Katsuragi had his own strategy, Ryuuen had come up with a very Ryuuen-like plan. And it seemed like things were evolving beyond where they’d been this morning.

“Three classes will share information about all the VIPs. That way, we’ll bypass the school’s rules,” said Ryuuen.

So, he wanted the three of us to join forces.

“It sounds like a pretty bold idea, but I don’t think it’s realistic. How do we know for sure that you have all the Class C VIPs, Ryuuen-kun?” asked Ichinose.

“It’s natural that you wouldn’t trust me. In that case, why don’t we make a contract? We’ll pledge to share the identities of our three VIPs and go after Class A. That way, our three classes will benefit, but Class A won’t.”

If Class A’s refusal to engage with us was difficult, this proposal only increased potential school-wide enmity.

“A contract is meaningless, since we won’t know who might betray whom. If Class C betrays us, it’ll all be over,” replied Horikita.

Her flat rejection was completely expected. It seemed that Ryuuen had already been allied with Class A for a while. Also, during the test on the island, Ryuuen had been quick to betray others. That alone was all the proof we needed as to how devious he was. His strategy wasn’t necessarily a bad one, but Ryuuen himself was the issue.

“Your thinking is solid, Horikita-san. If we don’t have a guarantee that Ryuuen-kun is telling the truth, then this is meaningless,” said Ichinose.

“There’s no point in playing a part anymore, is there? It’s not like you don’t have a handle on all of Class B’s goings-on,” said

Ryuuen.

The two were all smiles, but the mood changed. It grew tense, and it felt like we were all on tenterhooks.

“You’re giving me far too much credit. People don’t have that much trust in me. Besides, your proposal is high risk, low return. I can’t agree to it,” said Ichinose.

“Being secretive is prudent, but sometimes you need to act.”

“Maybe from your perspective. You’re casting a wide net right now, and gathering information. Haven’t you ever dreamed of rising up to Class B?” asked Kanzaki.

“Horikita-san rejected your proposal. Therefore, this plan is off to a bad start,” added Ichinose.

“Well, there’s no denying that. Even if Suzune wanted to agree, there’s a reason why she can’t,” said Ryuuen.

“What do you mean by that?” asked Horikita.

“You already know what I’m getting at, don’t you? For this strategy to work, you need to understand your own class perfectly. For Class D, which lacks any spirit of teamwork, this is an impossible undertaking. Right? It’s also impossible for Class A, since they’re split into two factions.”

The atmosphere in the room changed again. This time, the air felt heavy, like before a storm.

“But I can make this strategy work, since I rule my class. And it’s smart for Ichinose, since she’s incredibly popular within her class. I originally pitched the idea of a three-class alliance, but it’s also possible with just two classes. The chances of a perfect outcome might be lowered, but since it’s me we’re talking about, I can see it through. If we pull this off, Classes A and D will be stripped bare and left with nothing,” Ryuuen said.

He was willing to leave both Class A and D in the dust.

“You really overestimate me.”

The fact that Ryuuen had openly shared his idea and asked Class B to double-cross us right in front of Horikita, myself, and Kushida was very unsettling. Even if his proposal wasn’t perfect, Ryuuen was actively working to discover each class’ VIPs, and he could get there without too much trouble.

If so, then this was a crucial point for Class D.

“I might be overstepping here, but I doubt you’ll be able to pull this off,” Horikita said.

I thought it'd be smart to sit and observe silently, but apparently Horikita thought otherwise. Even if Ichinose decided to ally with Class D, we had no idea how much we could trust her. The possibility of Ichinose and Ryuuen teaming up was extremely dangerous.

"So do you understand the situation now, tagalong?" Ryuuen mocked me, but I didn't fall for his cheap tricks. Instead, I offered my honest opinion.

"Suppose Classes B and C *did* become allies. Wouldn't that mean that Classes A and D would become allies as well? I admit that Class D is fractured, but if faced with certain defeat, I think we'd come together. I believe Class A would do the same."

"Ichinose and I haven't entered into an alliance yet, so you have no way of knowing. Are you sure Katsuragi will cooperate with you?" asked Ryuuen.

Katsuragi was most definitely cautious. He probably wouldn't make any moves without evidence. However, since he'd also suffered losses on Ryuuen's account, there'd be some room for negotiation. After listening to me, Horikita had also realized that we couldn't afford to let Class B and Class C's alliance form.

"There's no point continuing this discussion any further. In the end, both parties would just crush each other," she said.

"What do you mean, Suzune?" asked Ryuuen.

"I mean exactly what Ayanokouji said earlier. If you insist on continuing to act as if this were a strategy meeting, we'll just have to assume that this is your intent and respond accordingly."

"As you wish. I'm looking forward to seeing whether you or not you can get your class to come together," replied Ryuuen.

Despite his open hostility, Ryuuen shamelessly extended his hand to ask us to work together. Horikita, meanwhile, was exhibiting her determination to fight to the bitter end. This would also be a determent to Ichinose. If she betrayed Class D right here, right now, she would probably be branded a traitor by all the classes. She'd be seen as someone who'd betray her allies whenever convenient, for the sake of a few points.

If Ichinose got saddled with that kind of reputation, it would weigh her down for a long time, probably for the rest of her high school days.

"I'm sorry, Ryuuen-kun. But you've hurt people in Class B with your actions. Even if it's possible for us to get more points, I can't ally with you on that reason alone," said Ichinose.

“Well, that’s unfortunate,” answered Ryuuen.

He didn’t look the least bit disappointed, but rather like he’d guessed that his plan wouldn’t fly from the get-go. Ryuuen got up and left the room, passing us by. As he left, Ryuuen glanced at me one more time. Our eyes happened to meet.

“It can’t be,” he muttered.

Of course, I didn’t respond. Ryuuen lightly shook his head.

“Ah, I should be going. My friends are calling me,” said Kushida.

She quickly retreated from the room. In the end, I was left with my usual partners in crime.

“Whew. I guess he saw through me,” said Ichinose. Even though Ichinose didn’t look particularly flustered, she sighed deeply.

“This will be tough. He’s gunning for us,” Horikita said.

“Ryuuen might think himself a dragon, but he’s really a snake. He’s so tenacious that when he finds his prey, he’ll go to any lengths to bring it down. But don’t you have it worse than me right now, Horikita-san? Ryuuen-kun is naturally wary of Class A, after all. He probably thinks that Class B will one day be his enemy, too. But right now, he’s got you in his sights,” said Ichinose.

Well, that was true. Class D had been stuck at the bottom, but the island test had allowed us to climb up a bit. Because of that, Class D might evolve into real competition.

“Don’t worry. Horikita isn’t the type to crack under pressure. Isn’t that right?” I said.

“Naturally,” Horikita replied.

Well, she appeared that way from the outside. But even if she were just putting on a brave face, it was possible she’d reveal her true, hidden self. I just didn’t know when she would. Maybe today, or maybe in ten years’ time. Most people fall short of becoming the people they were meant to be.

“Horikita-san, Ayanokouji-kun. I wanted to ask you something. Do you think this test will create trust between people of different classes?”

“No one’s looking to make enemies, but bringing people together like that will always be difficult. Even if two classes could become friendlier, it won’t be enough. We’d need unwavering cooperation between everyone in Classes D and B, and I don’t know how we’ll make such an alliance,” said Horikita.

“Yeah. Just like I’d expect of you, Horikita-san. You understand

this test very well. Ryuuen-kun's just full of hot air. I was right to choose your side." Ichinose seemed happy to be standing with Horikita. "Yes. Ryuuen-kun's plan will fail. It's probably best not to worry about it. The real problem is Katsuragi-kun's iron fortress strategy. What do you think about it now that you've spoken to him?"

"I said this yesterday, but Katsuragi is completely unapproachable. He'll talk to you, but he won't give an inch. I doubt he'll change his mind before the exam ends. At this point, I think all of Class A is taking the same stance. Don't you?" asked Kanzaki.

"Yeah. I think it's hopeless, too. We have no choice but to find a different way," said Ichinose.

We had three discussion periods left. After that, each individual group would have to submit their answers. Did we work in favor of our class, or our group? Or should we take action for our own sake?

"Well, I'm going to head back to my room," Horikita said flatly.

Since everyone else from the Dragon group had left, Horikita walked away without another word. As she made her way out, she met up with Hamaguchi, who appeared to be waiting for her. Ichinose watched Horikita's back as she left, then turned toward me.

"Would you walk with me for a little bit?" she asked.

"Sure. I don't mind."

I strolled out with Ichinose and two other students from Class B. It felt a little crowded. After we split from Kanzaki and reached the ship's deck, we slipped into a large crowd of students. Everyone looked as though they'd shaken off the test and were in the mood to have fun.

"I understand what Horikita-san said earlier, but I think there's still room for cooperation," said Ichinose.

"Cooperation?"

"Yes. I was surprised when Class A distanced themselves, but I think we have a chance. But to pull it off, we might have to reveal everything."

"Everything?"

"This entire test boils down to finding the VIP. That's the point, right? So if we play things by the book, we increase our chances by narrowing down the list and finding out who *isn't* the target. So, I'll tell you right now: I'm not the VIP. But I intend to find them and lead my group to victory."

Ichinose said that with confidence as she looked me square in

the eye. She continued.

"You might think that if I'm the target, I could just be hiding my identity. But Ayanokouji-kun, the reason I'm not is simple. Everything I do is for the sake of Class B," she said.

Her words held a mystery that was hard to explain. Considering Ichinose's behavior until now, there was only a fraction of doubt left in my mind. If she wanted my full cooperation, then she needed to take things a step further. If she showed me her phone voluntarily, right now, she would gain all of my trust.

However, she didn't display any signs of doing that. She didn't even try to take her phone out. Should I accept her statements as the simple, thoughtless pledge of an ordinary girl? Or did I detect a layer of intrigue? I couldn't tell, and that was why I felt what she said was mysterious. It was probably safer to just accept what she said.

"It must sound strange," said Ichinose, seemingly a little dissatisfied with my silence.

"Ah, no. Sorry. I don't think it's strange at all, really. I was just a little surprised that you came straight out, that's all. You said that if you were the VIP, you'd choose to lead your class to victory," I answered.

"I'm not lying. I think that lying might be necessary in competition, but I like to be honest as much as possible. I *do* want my class to win, fair and square. I thought the road to victory lay in narrowing down who the VIP is. Ah, you don't have to tell me anything if you don't want to, Ayanokouji-kun. I just wanted to explain my feelings. I thought if I told you, things might be easier."

"Even if perfect cooperation is impossible, trying to form solid relationships is no bad thing. If I don't answer now, it might hurt our relationship down the line."

"No, no, I don't think so." She sounded flustered, but this wasn't the time to hide.

What Ichinose was saying was true. Even if she fooled me and lured me into a trap, her reward would be rather small. Breaking the truce with Horikita and exploiting Class D would be nonsensical. Sure, I couldn't be 100% certain she wouldn't betray us, but I couldn't be 100% certain I wouldn't be killed by a meteor, either. No one should spend their time worrying about all the things that could possibly happen. I decided to be honest with her.

"I'm not the VIP. Neither is Yukimura, I can say that with absolutely certainty. Unfortunately, I don't really know about Karuizawa or the Professor…err, I mean, Sotomura. It's not clear yet.

Personally, I agree with you on principle."

I'd heard from Yukimura that Karuizawa and the Professor weren't VIPs, but I thought it'd be best to leave that part unsaid. If I was careless and one of them turned out to be the VIP, I'd only lose Ichinose's trust. I'd determined that Yukimura wasn't the VIP through his actions and attitude.

"S-sorry. It seems like I forced your answer," said Ichinose.

Ichinose lowered her head, as if burdened by feelings of guilt. She didn't need to apologize, though. *I'm the one who will need to apologize to you someday,* I thought.

"Hey, Hamaguchi-kun. Got a minute?" asked Ichinose.

"What is it, Ichinose-san?"

Hamaguchi approached us, looking relaxed. Ichinose filled him in on the current situation. Surprisingly, she concealed her cooperative relationship with Class D. Considering Ichinose's character, I would have guessed she'd get her class' approval.

"If Ayanokouji's confirmed it, there's no reason for me to refuse. I'm not the VIP," said Hamaguchi.

When I considered his relationship with Ichinose, I believed him. There'd be little merit in lying. That just risked fracturing the truce with Horikita. However, if we wanted to adopt a strategy without the risk of being exposed, we could do better than this.

"You haven't checked with your own class yet," I observed. Ichinose should have been able to get everyone in her class on board without having to resort to scare tactics like Ryuuen.

"I prefer to let my classmates act autonomously. There are people in my class who want points. It's not like I can arbitrarily transfer the VIP's rights to myself," said Ichinose. "This might sound impertinent, but I'll check with the remaining person myself. If that person answers me honestly, I'll tell you later, Ayanokouji-kun," she said.

"That's nice of you, but it's not like I've told you everything about Class D. We still haven't really established an open and honest relationship yet, and there's no guarantee I've told you the iron-clad truth."

"Oh, don't worry. As long as I just have your cooperation, Ayanokouji-kun, I'm happy," answered Ichinose.

With that, real cooperation in the Rabbit group began. I was sure that neither Ichinose, Hamaguchi, nor I were the VIP. After considering his behavior and attitude, we were convinced that

Yukimura wasn't the VIP, either. Excluding us four, that meant there were ten suspects remaining. One of them was the VIP.

It'd be just as hard as finding the leader on the deserted island, or perhaps an even more difficult task. The VIP would certainly feel the pressure, so he or she would naturally try concealing themselves. Though the test had seemed unreasonable at first, the school found a way to make it balanced.

"How do you plan on finding the VIP? Even if we try asking people directly, I can't imagine that they'll openly admit to anything. It'll probably be difficult to persuade them with words alone," said Hamaguchi.

"Well, isn't the point of this test for us to figure it out?" asked Ichinose.

She was right. This was an exceptionally difficult exam. You needed to extract information from someone who wanted to conceal the truth. With Ichinose making her move, the once-hopeless situation was starting to change.

4.2

Unless you were psychic, finding the VIP wasn't going to be easy. People are born liars. If a person ever claims to live their life without telling a lie, their life itself is probably a lie. Lies are inescapable parts of us. A kind lie is no exception; it's still a lie.

Somewhere in this group of students was the VIP. We still had time until the discussion period began. Like last time, I was the first to arrive. I'd come early to observe everyone's behavior.

A group of Class C girls were the first people to enter. They were chatting loudly, looking like they were enjoying their conversation quite a bit. However, when they saw me, they instantly lowered their voices and sounded disgusted. They made sure to sit a good distance away from me. Next in was Yukimura, who was grinning. We briefly exchanged glances, and then he sat near me. He didn't seem particularly different from his usual self.

Next came the Class A group, Machida and Takemoto. Morishige came in by himself. Since they'd decided not to discuss anything, they once again sat at the far end of the room, close to the Class C girls.

"Hey, Machida-kun. After we're done here, do you want to hang out with us? The three of us were looking to have some fun."

"I see," replied Machida.

Even though Machida wouldn't participate, all the girls noticed him. Apart from Ichinose and Ibuki, they seemed interested in Machida. I wasn't especially jealous or anything… Okay, I might've been a little jealous. The girls were probably inviting Machida to hang out because they'd given up on finding the VIP. Or maybe that was part of their plan. Was this how men and women formed relationships? Machida didn't seem perturbed by this. In fact, he looked pleased.

Next came the other Class D students: the Professor and Karuizawa. Rather than coming here together, it looked like they'd arrived at the same time by sheer coincidence. Karuizawa appeared openly disgusted by the Professor's presence. After they entered, she quickly moved toward the back of the room.

"Hey, aren't you sitting in my seat?" asked Karuizawa. Despite being late, she glared at the Class C girls. After seeing them being so friendly with Machida, she seemed even more frustrated.

"I have no idea what you're talking about. What do you mean, *your* seat? Just sit anywhere. Any spot should be fine."

“Well, that’s the seat I want. That’s my spot. Move,” urged Karuizawa.

“Huh? I’m talking to Machida-kun right now. He promised to hang out with me tonight,” said Manabe.

“Hey, Machida-kun. Could you please tell her that you want me next to you?”

Machida looked a little troubled by the situation, hesitating over which girl he should pick. However, Karuizawa quickly inserted herself between Manabe and Machida, and grabbed his hand.

“How about we spend some time together, just the two of us? Or have you promised that girl you’ll go with her? I hate two-timers. If you’re going to mess around with that girl then that’ll be the end of it, I guess,” said Karuizawa.

Whoa. I was amazed she could say that with a straight face, given that she was already dating Hirata.

The “just the two of us” part really seemed to strike a chord with Machida. It appeared he’d made his decision.

“Excuse me, but would you please move? That’s the seat Karuizawa’s been sitting in,” said Machida.

“Huh? What the hell? Ugh, this is bull,” Manabe whined.

The girls, looking upset, promptly got up and left. Karuizawa moved into the empty seat. Actually, she scooted so close that she was practically glued to Machida. Seriously, they were right next to each other, their bodies pressed together. Karuizawa’s actions didn’t seem petty or frivolous to me, but that was probably because I already knew what kind of person she was.

Karuizawa was dating Hirata. Whether or not Machida knew that, it looked like he’d started to fall for her. Appearance-wise, she was most definitely cute. Also, from the perspective of someone with a crush, it made sense that he’d want to protect her.

The interesting thing was that, despite how recently our group had formed, we’d already developed our own unique hierarchy, including power dynamics. The loners were loners, and the popular kids were popular. The organizers were organizers. However, not everything was business as usual. For example, if there were two organizers in the same place, one would take charge, and the other would be dropped. It was like a microcosm of the jungle, survival of the fittest.

The person who lost that battle was demoted in terms of social status. In some cases, he or she might drop all the way to the lowest

rung on the ladder. They'd be so low that their presence wouldn't matter to those around them. You could say I was such a person.

The interesting thing about this exam was that it made people who would normally be wary of one another come together and join hands. Ichinose might have been incredibly popular among her friends in her class, but among people who were obviously her enemies, she had a low level of influence. Would Hirata have been able to get us a little more organized?

"Hello, everyone!"

Speak of the devil. Ichinose arrived, bringing life into the depressing room. I found the air in the room especially heavy today, but thought it best not to speak carelessly. Even so, Karuizawa's actions seemed overbearing and a little baffling. Even if she really wanted to get to know Machida better, she didn't need to openly antagonize the Class C girls.

However, that weird situation didn't seem all that important to the exam itself.

As someone who knew what Karuizawa was like, I could already see how her personality informed her actions. I wondered if Karuizawa always wanted to be at the very top, whether it was in class or this group. Of course, it wasn't an easy thing for a girl to stand at the top. I mean, if it was an extremely charismatic girl like Ichinose, that was one thing. But if you didn't naturally excel, it was impossible.

However, in our school lives, relationships determined whether someone placed high or low in the caste system. Through her overbearing behavior, Karuizawa had become a leader for the Class D girls. She'd also gained a lot of influence over both guys and girls by becoming Hirata's girlfriend.

So if you applied what you knew about Karuizawa's behavior to how she was acting now, the truth was clear. She'd forcibly pushed herself onto the most confident man, Machida, and with him in the palm of her hand, she'd taken control of the room. That was why the Class C students couldn't go against Machida, and had reluctantly left their seats.

If you didn't mind being hated, what did you gain by dominating the field? A sense of superiority? Self-satisfaction? The spotlight? I still couldn't understand the root cause of her behavior.

"This isn't good."

"Yeah. If things continue like this, the VIP will get away."

Yukimura sat next to me and muttered his concerns. I opted to

just roll with it.

“Now then. Will Class A not participate this time, either?” asked Ichinose.

“Of course we won’t. Feel free to talk amongst yourselves, though. We haven’t changed our policy,” answered Machida.

Beside him sat Morishige, who had erased all semblance of human emotion from his expression. I had seen him around before this test. According to rumor, Class A was divided into two different factions, one led by Katsuragi and one by Sakayanagi. Morishige was one of those who’d turned against Katsuragi during the test on the island.

Under normal circumstances, he probably wouldn’t have followed Katsuragi’s orders, but Sakayanagi was sick and thus absent from the trip. Without the presence of his leader, Morishige had no choice but to do as he was told.

I’d thought that Katsuragi would’ve lost influence, considering the damage he incurred by failing the island test. However, it looked like he wasn’t going to crumble that easily. Since Morishige had remained silent for two days now, it looked as though even he had no choice but to follow orders.

“Since it would be a waste to spend an hour in complete silence, how about we play cards again?” asked Ichinose.

Ichinose took out her cards immediately. How you approached your goal was a major aspect of this test. She wanted to narrow down the list of suspects through open, honest conversation. On the other hand, Katsuragi aimed for stability by suppressing all conversation. Then there was Ryuuen, who wanted to turn everyone into his enemy while taking complete control of his class. He said that he’d found the secret logic underlying the test. However, I wasn’t sure.

In the end, we became absorbed in playing cards for the hour, and then disbanded. Yukimura frantically searched the area for something, but unfortunately it didn’t seem like he’d gotten any clues as to the VIP’s identity. I’m sure it was the same for all the other students.

Even if we did talk, it wasn’t as though the VIP was just going to step forward. I watched the order in which all the students left. The Class C students were usually the first out the door, but they hadn’t moved. Meanwhile, the Class A students, typically the last to leave, were the first out the door. Well, not everyone in Class A had left yet. Machida and Karuizawa were exchanging contact information. Yukimura and the Professor got up.

“I think it’s time to head back. You coming, Ayanokouji?” Yukimura asked.

“Yeah.”

While we spoke, Karuizawa answered her phone and stood. She exited the room, chatting away on the phone, seemingly talking about something funny or interesting. As she walked away, the three Class C girls brushed past me and made their way out.

“Hey. Did you get a weird vibe from those three just now?” asked Yukimura. He turned to me with a slightly puzzled look.

“You think so? I can’t say that I noticed anything of the sort,” answered the Professor.

The Professor’s tone was ridiculously pompous. However, I thought Yukimura’s feelings were right on the money. The Class C girls had looked considerably angry. Yukimura and I peered into the hallway to see what was going on. We saw the three girls closely following Karuizawa. Being alone, she was at a disadvantage.
The situation had me worried. Also, Ibuki, who might’ve mitigated the other three, wasn’t around.

“You think they have a bone to pick with her?” asked Yukimura.

“Let’s follow them. I don’t think there’ll be violence, but it could lead to an uproar.”

“Damn Karuizawa. She’s always making people hate her. I wanted us to spend our precious time finding the VIP,” Yukimura grumbled.

While the Professor headed back to his room, Yukimura and I quietly chased the four girls. When we turned the corner, I heard the *ka-chack* sound of an emergency exit door slamming shut. The elevators weren’t even crowded, so it wasn’t like there was any reason to use the stairs. There had to be another reason why they’d gone in there. I opened the door and heard voices.

“Hey. why’d you bring me to a place like this?!”

“Stop playing dumb! You *did* push Rika, didn’t you? Start talking.”

“H-huh? I already told you, you’ve got the wrong person!”

The three girls surrounded Karuizawa, forcing her up against the wall. They were preventing her from escaping. However, even surrounded, Karuizawa offered no apologies. She continued to deny what they were saying. Maybe she really was innocent.

“Look, I have plans later. Can you please move?” asked

Karuizawa.

“Okay, let’s confirm it right now. I’m going to call Rika. If it wasn’t you, we’ll forgive you.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. I’ll call the teacher.”

“And what will you tell the teacher, exactly? It’s not like we’re being violent with you or anything. Besides, if you talk to the teacher, we’ll tell on you, too. We’ll say you pushed Rika. You’ll also get in trouble.”

Neither side intended to back down. Karuizawa tried to escape, but the girls grabbed her arm and pushed her up against the wall. One of the girls took out her phone, probably to call Rika.

“W-wait!” Karuizawa pleaded with them to not call.

“What? Why should we wait?”

“I just remembered something. I bumped into that girl before.”

“You’re a total liar. You remembered her from the very beginning, didn’t you? Well, whatever. So, are you going to apologize to Rika properly?”

“No way. She was in the wrong. She’s a complete airhead.”

I would’ve thought Karuizawa would take responsibility for her actions, but instead, she refused. She refused despite knowing it would upset them.

“You’re seriously pissing us off. We might’ve forgiven you if you’d actually apologized to Rika. But now, we definitely won’t forgive you.”

The girl pressed down against Karuizawa’s shoulder.

“Whatever. You probably never planned on forgiving me.”

After Karuizawa spat out those words, one of the girls, Yamashita, lost her patience. “Shiho-chan. I’ve had enough. Karuizawa’s unforgivable.”

“I know, right? She should understand exactly how Rika felt. Why don’t we bully her for real?”

She struck Karuizawa’s shoulder with a little extra force. Yukimura started to throw the door open, but I grabbed his arm. Even if we stepped in now, Karuizawa would be threatened again at some point. However, if they got even a little violent while we were watching them, it’d be a deterrent for later. Also, depending on how violent they got, we could possibly threaten them, telling them we’d report them to the school.

More importantly, Karuizawa Kei looked like she was starting to change.

“Ahh…ahh…” She panted as if she were having a hard time breathing. She held her head in her hands as if she were in pain. When Manabe and the others saw her suffering, they weren’t sympathetic. The opposite, actually. It irritated them.

“Act as girly as you want, we’re still not going to forgive you.”

They grabbed Karuizawa’s hair and forcefully yanked her head up.

“I’ve always hated your face, Karuizawa. I mean, don’t you girls think she’s just butt-ugly?”

“Yeah, for sure. Don’t you just want to cut her face?”

“St-stop. Stop it.”

“‘St-stop it’, she says. What happened to your big attitude?”

The more you envied your enemy, the more you hated them, to the point where you wanted to strip away their advantages. If we were talking looks, then Karuizawa had them all beat. But Manabe, Yamashita, and Yabu wouldn’t be satisfied until they’d verbally torn Karuizawa’s pretty face apart. Karuizawa trembled, frightened. She was on the verge of tears, still unable to move.

People show their true colors when they’re in jeopardy. A little more pressure, and I’d know who Karuizawa Kei really was. However, Yukimura couldn’t stand by any longer. He threw open the door. The three girls were naturally shocked by his sudden appearance. Karuizawa, on the other hand, looked like he’d saved her life.

“What are you doing?!” Yukimura shouted.

“What? Nothing. Right? We were just talking to Karuizawa-san. Yeah?”

Manabe glared at Karuizawa, as if telling her not to say another word. But Karuizawa wasn’t the sort to shy away.

“Yukimura-kun, these girls just abducted me and started getting all violent. They’re seriously the worst, aren’t they? They were being, like, super annoying, so I told them to get lost,” said Karuizawa.

She’d normally never talk to Yukimura, but she was probably grateful to him now. Meanwhile, the Class C girls glared at Yukimura. Their eyes seemed to say, “This has nothing to do with you.”

“Well, I’m just talking with Karuizawa about her problem, what she did to Rika. You heard how Karuizawa slammed into her, right?”

“Don’t you think it’s better to just let things go? They bumped into each other. It’s not like Karuizawa was at fault,” Yukimura said.

“You shut up. This has nothing to do with you.”

“…”

Under the weight of their glares, he fell silent. Karuizawa shot a look at Yukimura, like she thought he was pathetic. She quietly took

out her phone.

"Just leave me alone. If you don't, I'll call someone."

"Who are you going to call? Hirata-kun? Machida-kun? I mean, I guess a slut like you has a hundred guys on speed dial, right?"

Fights between girls often got dirty, and unlike with men, violence wasn't really an option. This was painful to watch.

"A teacher was just here. I think it'd be better if you left," I said.

I had no other choice but to step in and break this up. Class C probably didn't want to cause a scene.

"You better bow your head and apologize to Rika."

The Class C girls kept intimidating Karuizawa, who desperately tried to keep a brave face. But it was obvious that she'd lost her confidence. The other girls seemed to know that. They continued their hostility.

"Are you okay?" asked Yukimura, who seemed unable to leave Karuizawa to their mercy. She was hyperventilating.

"Just leave me alone!" As Yukimura drew nearer, Karuizawa slapped his hand away.

"Hey, what the hell? I only came to check on you because I was worried!"

"God, shut up! Nobody asked you!"

Karuizawa's breathing grew even more ragged. Yukimura stepped back, overpowered. I decided to let sleeping dogs lie and stepped back, too. Karuizawa glared at me as she opened the emergency stairwell door and slammed it as hard as she could after she left.

"Jeez, what's with her? She's always, always causing trouble for people!"

I understood Yukimura's feelings of resentment. Karuizawa was certainly a troublemaker. Yukimura, seemingly exhausted from the ordeal, left without saying another word. I stood alone in the emergency stairwell and thought about Karuizawa. The leader of the Class D girls had shown her vulnerable side. However, the threats hadn't frightened her; she'd been terrified for another reason.

4.3

It was the middle of the night on the second day. The pool, which was crowded during the daytime, had once again grown silent. There was no one around. I took out my phone to make a call. Because the phones already had teachers' contact information stored in them, getting in touch with Chabashira-sensei was a relatively simple task.

Though it was the middle of summer, we were still on the ocean, and the night wind that passed over the ship's deck was quite chilly.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Ayanokouji."

"It's okay. I'm sorry for calling you so late."

"An instructor is obligated to consult with a student. It's nothing out of the ordinary. Besides, for better or worse, this is the first time you've actually called me."

Chabashira-sensei didn't exactly treat Class D with love. She wasn't well-liked by the students. Even if someone was having trouble, they probably wouldn't have gone to her.

"There's something I wanted to ask you, sensei, but… You know, you look pale."

At first I hadn't noticed because it was dark, but Chabashira-sensei looked so pale that I thought she might be deathly ill.

"Don't worry about it. Adult issues. Anyway, what did you want to ask?"

Considering I could smell the alcohol on her breath, I thought I had the situation well figured out. "You told me that we can use our points to buy anything, but there are still some exceptions to that rule. Right?"

"Yes. Exceptions exist, naturally. For example, if you request to buy the life of a teacher or student, we cannot honor that request."

"So I was wondering. What's the most expensive thing that someone has bought with their points?"

Right as I was speaking, I felt the presence of someone else nearby.

"Yoohoo, Sae-chan! How you feeling?"

Hoshinomiya-sensei arrived. Was it just a coincidence? Unlikely. She'd probably followed Chabashira-sensei.

"You're drunk, aren't you?" Chabashira-sensei said.

“Hmm? Oh no, of course I’m not, I’m not drunk. I was just acting all sleepy, you know?”

“Jeez. You can really hold your liquor. You handled yourself today, and you’re fine now, too.”

Apparently, Hoshinomiya-sensei had an iron liver.

“Good evening, Ayanokouji-kun. How are you doing?”

Hoshinomiya-sensei was acting a little overly familiar with me. She placed her hand on my shoulders, and then hugged me so tight I could smell the alcohol on her body and breath. Of course, a minor such as myself would have no clue, but was alcohol really that delicious? Just the smell of it made me not want to drink it.

“I’m fine. If I wasn’t, I wouldn’t be here,” I said.

“That answer was so not-cute that I’m impressed! So, Ayanokouji-kun, do you love the *tsuntsun* older sister types, like Sae-chan?” asked Hoshinomiya-sensei.

“Don’t wrap yourself around a student. You’re getting in the way of my work.”

Thankfully, Chabashira-sensei grabbed Hoshinomiya-sensei by the nape of her neck and dragged her off. I recalled the teachers’ conversation I’d overheard the other day. Even the instructors were wary of each other, competing with and deceiving others as they aimed for the top class. I didn’t know if it was because getting to a higher class meant an increase in their salaries, or if there was a longstanding rivalry between Chabashira-sensei and Hoshinomiya-sensei from their school days.

I had no doubt that the school and the teachers kept things fair. Leaking answers to students would be a huge problem. That meant it was likely that Ichinose had been placed into the Rabbit group without knowing why. She had keen insight and sharp observation skills, though. Sooner or later, she’d probably think something was off. She’d wonder why she was in the Rabbit group.

It’d be nice to write it all off as sheer coincidence, but Hoshinomiya-sensei was bad at hiding her emotions. Ichinose might soon discover that she’d been put into the group to find out about Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. If that happened, how should I respond? While I thought about that, I began to choose my next actions.

“So what were you two talking about in the middle of the night? Isn’t that in itself a really big problem?” asked Hoshinomiya-sensei.

“A big problem? As a teacher, it’s only natural for me to consult my students and soothe their anxieties,” answered Chabashira-sensei.

“If that’s true, wouldn’t it be better for you to do it with more people around? If you look like you’re sneaking around, I can’t help but think it’s suspicious.”

Even though Hoshinomiya-sensei was trying to unsettle her, Chabashira-sensei remained calm and collected. “Ayanokouji requested this location. He wanted to consult me in private,” Chabashira-sensei stated matter-of-factly.

“Hmm. Well, I suppose you’re not violating any rules,” muttered Hoshinomiya-sensei.

“Good. Now hurry up and leave already. I’ll head back soon myself.”

“Okay, okay. But remember, no sexy times,” teased Hoshinomiya-sensei.

She left, with that very unnecessary comment as her parting shot.

“Sorry. She’s troublesome.”

“’S all right.”

Chabashira-sensei didn’t say anything about being investigated. Well, maybe it was just a personal problem. I didn’t know what there was between them, but it had nothing to do with me.

“Anyway, picking up where we left off. I was wondering, what’s the largest amount of points someone spent in the past?”

Chabashira-sensei nodded, looking like she was lost in thought. “Well, I can only speak from my own experience, but it was when someone wanted to change the school rules. Of course, you’re limited to a certain realistic scope. For example, you could change the class start time in order to avoid being late to class,” she answered.

Chabashira didn’t provide facts, only hypotheticals.

“Can you give me examples?”

“Are you dissatisfied with my answer?”

“Nah, I don’t really mind. I understand how the school’s systems operate,” I answered.

Depending on how you used your points, you could make changes to the system in even the most trivial of ways. In other words, the possibilities were endless. Private points were of incredible significance.

“You could have just emailed me that question. I don’t understand why you wanted me to meet you.”

“If I sent you an email, there would be a record. I wanted to avoid that.”

I decided to leave it at that. I walked away, in a different direction from the way Hoshinomiya-sensei had exited. While I still had more questions, this was good enough for the time being.

“I’ll ask you for a favor in the near future,” I called.

When I looked back over my shoulder, I saw Chabashira-sensei eyeing me with suspicion.

4.4

It was around two in the morning when my roommate quietly woke up. Taking extreme consideration as to not wake the other three people in the room, Hirata slipped out of bed. Since students were required to sleep in their jerseys, he stole out of the room while still wearing it.

After I'd confirmed he wasn't going to the men's room, I grabbed my keycard and got out of bed myself. There was no guarantee he'd make a move today, but it seemed like my labors had begun to bear fruit. Once he realized that I was awake, we exchanged glances without speaking a word.

Without looking away, I told him there was something I needed to talk to him about. He said he'd be waiting in the hall. Then, he stepped out. I found him in the hallway, wearing a troubled look.

"Did I wake you? Or were you already awake?" he asked.

"The latter. I thought you might be leaving the room tonight," I said.

"Why would you think that? This was the first time I've left the room at night."

Trying to deceive him would have a detrimental effect, so I thought it best to just be honest. "Karuizawa contacted you, didn't she?"

Hirata seemed to understand what I was getting at, just as I'd expect. His comprehension skills were flawless. "Do you happen to know something about it?" he asked.

"Well, I'm in her group. I don't know how much she's told you, but I get the situation."

Hirata waited for me to continue. Well, considering I'd chased him down in the middle of the night, it had to appear urgent.

"You said you wanted to act as a bridge between Horikita and the rest of the class, right? This has to do with that," I said.

"I see. So Horikita-san told you to talk to me, Ayanokouji-kun?"

He'd saved me a lot of trouble. Now I didn't have to bother with a lengthy explanation.

"She asked me to report on everything that happens in the Rabbit group, including Karuizawa's situation. Once I heard about what happened with Karuizawa, Horikita told me to keep an eye on

you, too, Hirata. She told me to follow you. But you said you wanted to be a bridge for her, so I thought this might be the chance to finally make that happen."

"What kind of information does she want?" he asked.

"Everything you know about Karuizawa. Also, whatever it was you talked to her about."

Hirata probably didn't see why I needed information about Karuizawa. However, he seemed to understand the impact this could potentially have.

"I don't know what I can tell you, honestly. I have to consider Karuizawa-san's feelings."

With that, Hirata started walking away. I decided to just follow him at a slow, unhurried pace.

Even though I'd been in bed for about two hours, I didn't have bedhead. I didn't really worry about personal grooming most of the time, but I knew I had to take it into consideration when I was with other people. I didn't want to make them uncomfortable when they looked at me.

"Ayanokouji-kun, I'm sure you won't say anything unnecessary, but what I'm about to tell you is extremely delicate. Also, Karuizawa-san might refuse to talk and head back to her room. Please understand that first," he said.

I could always eavesdrop on them, but Hirata probably wouldn't like that. Since this was something Karuizawa didn't want others to hear, she'd called for him in the middle of the night. He'd never approve of me listening in from the shadows. My best bet was to just give him a straight, honest answer.

The meeting place was in front of the vending machine near the second-level lounge area. Being in the center of the hallway, it was easy for people to see us, but its placement also meant that we could see them. Its location made eavesdropping difficult.

Karuizawa was already waiting for Hirata, clad in her jersey and sitting on the sofa. When Karuizawa saw Hirata coming, she instantly smiled, but when she noticed me trailing slightly behind, her joy was replaced with anger. She stood and shouted at me.

"What're you doing here, Ayanokouji-kun?!"

"I asked him to come," said Hirata.

"You did, Hirata-kun? Why? I told you I wanted to talk alone."

"I know. But Karuizawa-san, I was worried about what you told

me earlier. That's why I thought it might be a good idea to bring Ayanokouji-kun, since he seems to understand the situation. I'm sorry for not telling you first."

Karuizawa looked upset, but it didn't seem like she'd snap at Hirata. "But…I said I wanted to talk alone, just the two of us," she repeated.

"If you want, we can be alone. But when we spoke earlier, you never said anything about it having to be just the two of us."

I already assumed this was related to the trouble she'd had with the Class C girls, but I wondered how Karuizawa would approach the topic. If she just wanted to vent her anger, there'd be no reason for it to be just the two of them. Karuizawa had wanted to talk about something without any third parties present. That meant she wouldn't talk about it if I were here.

Perhaps because he was impatient, or perhaps because he thought silence was pointless, Hirata started talking about their earlier phone call.

"You were telling me about a fight with Manabe-san from Class C. Is it true?" he asked.

Karuizawa opened her mouth slightly to answer, but said nothing, perhaps because she was still wary of my presence. Hirata once again broke the silence.

"Ayanokouji-kun, did you know about the fight with Manabe-san and the others?" he asked.

"Sort of."

Since this wasn't working, Hirata attempted to shift the conversation. It looked like he intended to ask me questions. Karuizawa seemed dissatisfied, but she continued to listen.

"From what Karuizawa-san has told me, it seems like the girls were making false accusations. They took her to a deserted spot and started hounding her for answers. They were on the verge of using violence," Hirata said.

"Yeah. That's all true. I saw it myself. Yukimura saw it, too."

"I see."

Hirata looked momentarily lost in thought and closed his eyes. I wondered what he'd do. Would he call Manabe and her friends out and reprimand them? Or would he report them to the school?

"If Manabe-san and her friends got violent with you, we definitely need to take action. I absolutely cannot allow violence," he

continued.

When Karuizawa heard Hirata's just words, she momentarily broke into a smile. But when she saw me looking at her, her expression changed back to anger.

"Karuizawa-san, they were so cruel that you were completely overwhelmed, and couldn't stand it. Right?" I asked.

"No."

Karuizawa tried to answer, but seemingly couldn't. She just glared at me without saying anything more. I couldn't lie, so I just told Hirata what I'd seen. Apparently, Karuizawa and some girl named Rika had some trouble in the past. Manabe and her friends wanted to make Karuizawa apologize. But then they'd almost gotten violent with Karuizawa. Hirata, after hearing the whole story, nodded as if I'd filled in some gaps.

"I see. So that's why you told me," he said.

"Told you what?" I asked.

"Karuizawa-san asked me to take revenge on Manabe-san and her friends."

I hadn't expected such unsettling words. Then again, from the perspective of someone who'd been physically threatened, it must've looked like a kill-or-be-killed situation. After Hirata spoke, Karuizawa finally broke her silence.

"Why did you tell him?" she asked.

"Because this isn't like you, Karuizawa-san. You aren't a violent person," Hirata answered.

"But your girlfriend's suffering, right? You should want to help me."

"Yes, I do. But I don't believe in an eye for an eye. You know that, don't you?"

Their core differences were starting to clash.

"Let's think this through. If possible, let's find a way to get along with Manabe-san and her friends," he said.

"That's impossible, isn't it? I mean, they absolutely hate me for practically no reason. Please, you have to understand!" she begged.

"No reason? Didn't this start because you had an issue with Morofuji-san, Karuizawa?"

Hirata said Morofuji, but he probably meant Rika. That must've been her last name. It was amazing how much information he had.

“But that’s… I didn’t have any choice! Shinohara and the others were there, and—”

“So because Shinohara was there, you had no choice? What does that mean?” I asked.

“You shut your mouth!” she screamed. Her voice carried all the way down the hallway.

“Please, I’m begging you. Help me. Hirata-kun. You said you’d protect me, didn’t you?”

“Of course I’ll protect you. But I can’t just hurt Manabe-san and her friends for no real reason. Let’s try to find a way to resolve things peacefully, through discussion.”

“I’m telling you, it’s not possible! If I could do that, I wouldn’t need your help!”

What she said might have sounded absurd, but I understood how she felt. Karuizawa’s position was more dangerous than I expected. Things might very well end violently. For example, students here weren’t allowed to smoke, much like many other schools around the world. But there were many students worldwide who smoked and got away with it. Not everything could be bound by law or governed by rules, and bullying was one of those things.

Hirata did seem to be worried about Karuizawa, but he was also worried about Manabe and her friends. Hirata wanted to think of a way to resolve things peacefully for all parties. He wasn’t treating Karuizawa like his treasured girlfriend, but as another friend.

“It doesn’t matter what the reason is. I can’t do what you want. You’re one of my classmates, Karuizawa-san. If you’re in trouble, I’ll help you, protect you. But I can’t hurt someone else to do that, even if they’re from Class C,” he said.

“You liar! You said you’d protect me!” she shouted.

“‘Liar’? You’ve known this was my stance since the beginning.” He stood up. The next words out of his mouth would’ve taken all the Class D students by surprise. “I’ve told you from the start that we aren’t really boyfriend and girlfriend. I don’t mind pretending to go out with you, but I definitely won’t fight a war for you.”

Apparently, their relationship was a huge lie.

“What?! Wh-why are you saying all of this now?!” Karuizawa was horrified by what she’d just heard.

I understood Hirata’s intentions. He was using Karuizawa to extract information as a tribute to Horikita. That was what it looked like, anyway.

“Because we need a new option now. I want to help you,” he said.

He wasn’t abandoning Karuizawa at all. He was seriously trying to help her, in his own way. He approached Karuizawa, who now looked really upset, but didn’t even try to touch her slender, delicate shoulder. I would’ve expected him to do that much.

“So are you saying…it’s better for me to get violent with them?” she asked.

“That’s not what I’m saying. I’ll do what I can to help you. When morning comes, I intend to speak with Manabe-san and her friends. I’ll tell them to stop harassing you, Karuizawa-san. You probably won’t like this, but I’ll tell them that you’ll apologize.”

“I don’t want to!” Karuizawa had come to Hirata in order to take revenge on Manabe and her friends, and that spoke to her true personality—her real self. More than anything else, Karuizawa was afraid.

“If that’s the case, then I can’t help you. I’m sorry.”

Hirata was calm. Even now, he was composed. But he was also extremely reliable, and for someone like Karuizawa who needed that reliability, losing it was basically a death sentence.

“Ayanokouji-kun, do you have any ideas?” asked Hirata. It seemed like he was trying to make me take a more active role in this.

“Whatever! If you’re not going to listen to me, then I don’t need you!” Karuizawa threw the can of juice she was holding down the hall. The contents spilled all over the place, and the sound echoed down the hall.

“Our relationship is over. It’s over!” she shouted.

With that, Karuizawa abandoned us and fled. Hirata seemed annoyed not because the truth of their sham relationship had been revealed, but because he couldn’t help her. He showed no signs of running after her. She wasn’t his priority.

“Ayanokouji-kun. I have my limits. I can’t do everything. Please understand that,” he said.

I’d planned to use Hirata to extract information about Karuizawa. However, it appeared that Hirata had used me instead, and used this opportunity to task me with saving Karuizawa from her troubles.

“You said that you wanted to be a bridge to connect people, but that’s a lie, isn’t it? You’re everyone’s ally.”

“Yes. I’m Karuizawa-san’s ally, and I’m your ally as well, Ayanokouji-kun. However, my priorities might change depending on the situation. You’re far more capable than everyone thinks,” Hirata observed.

“You think way too highly of me.”

“Really? I’m good at reading other people. That’s why I understand.”

I wanted to ask more about this supposed skill but decided that we should resolve this problem first. “Your relationship with Karuizawa sounds like it was all for show. Is that really true?” I asked.

“When you put it that way, it sounds like you already suspected as much.”

“You and Karuizawa have been dating for almost four months, but your relationship with her hadn’t progressed much. Of course, I considered the possibility that you were maintaining a pure and platonic kind of relationship, but even then, you’ve always kept yourself distant from her. You still call each other by your last names.”

Even if they hadn’t gotten closer physically, they should’ve grown nearer emotionally. But Hirata and Karuizawa’s relationship had showed absolutely no signs of change, for better or for worse. In a romantic relationship, such stagnation was exceptionally odd.

“You’re exactly right. We weren’t really dating. We were going out because we both felt that it was necessary. I suppose you consider that contradictory,” he answered.

In other words, theirs had been a mutually beneficial relationship. In that case, which one of them had proposed the idea, and which had agreed to it? Well, I suppose that was obvious. Karuizawa had asked Hirata to pretend to go out with her, and Hirata had simply honored her request. With that in mind, her actions made more and more sense.

“The rumors started roughly three weeks after school began. From that point onward, Karuizawa’s popularity soared by leaps and bounds,” I observed.

A similar phenomenon had occurred in Rabbit Group. By attaching herself to Machida, Karuizawa could assert herself more aggressively than normal, and her level of influence had increased. To Karuizawa, Hirata was basically a host, and she was his parasite. He’d been a tool to enhance her social standing.

“You played the part of Karuizawa’s boyfriend so that her social

standing would improve."

I'd arrived at the truth. In response, Hirata simply smiled. I'd thought that was the entire truth, but then I realized that it didn't explain everything. Besides, Hirata hadn't admitted that I was right. Karuizawa had used Hirata and Machida to place herself at the top of the school's caste system? No, that alone wasn't enough.

After all, why would Hirata have accepted her request so easily? That was a tall order for him. Karuizawa's aggressive attitude was getting more and more out of hand every day. She was behaving more like a bully.

Why would Hirata approve of this and not criticize her at all? Besides, did Karuizawa really just want to use Hirata and the others to get to the top? I was doubtful. I couldn't say she'd used Machida *just* to increase her influence. If anything, she showed no interest in the group. More often than not, she just sat in silence. Maybe she hadn't planned to use Machida at first.

In that case, what had triggered her to establish contact with Machida? I felt like I was starting to discover Karuizawa Kei's true self.

"It's to protect herself?" I asked. That was the only remaining answer. There was no mistaking it.

"So, you understand. Honestly, when I heard you say it, I got goosebumps," Hirata said.

"I heard about it from Horikita; that's all. She said Karuizawa had her reasons for clinging to you and to others."

But Hirata wasn't simple enough to fall for my deception. "Ayanokouji-kun. I have to be very honest, but… Well, this is going to sound very rude, but I honestly find you a little weird. You kind of creep me out. I'm sorry if that offends you."

"Creep you out? Why do you think that?"

"I've been watching you since school started. The Ayanokouji-kun back then and the Ayanokouji-kun now are like two different people. Your presence, the words you use… It's like you have two different personalities."

Hirata was frighteningly observant. It was only natural that he would think something was off.

"I've already told you, it's all because of Horikita's advice. I already gave her a detailed report about my group. I'm only following her orders. It's just like back on the island. Horikita made the right calls and led Class D to victory. She's why we got so many points. I

mean, that's good for me, too. She's just so awful at communicating with others that she's afraid to try, you know? She told me to talk to you and report back."

I spent a lot of time with Horikita. Because of that, Hirata probably wouldn't doubt my words.

"Well. I suppose Horikita-san must've determined that saving Karuizawa-san will give our class a lead," he reasoned.

"Yeah."

"But I do think you're amazing, Ayanokouji-kun. You're different from Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun."

"I'm worse than them."

"Even if you're just following Horikita-san's orders, you're still the one talking to me right now, Ayanokouji-kun. It isn't as though Horikita gave you a list of prepared responses. I think that you show clear, well-reasoned logic. That's not something you can pretend to have."

Hirata was smarter than I'd imagined. Although I had some concerns about his desire to constantly save everyone, he had extraordinary abilities.

"You've already said as much, but I agreed to act like Karuizawa-san's boyfriend so she could protect herself. That's what she wanted. She said she wanted me to save her. It might be a little difficult for you to imagine, but throughout her elementary and junior high years, she was viciously bullied."

"Is that really the truth?" I asked.

So Karuizawa's hyperventilation had been triggered by memories of her past. If she had suffered such deep trauma, it explained why she couldn't shake off the earlier encounter.

"Of course, I only met Karuizawa-san after she started school here. But I understood. People who are bullied give off a unique vibe. That's why I agreed to go out with her. That way, Karuizawa-san would free herself from her past by using her position as my girlfriend. I don't think that Karuizawa-san has been showing us her real personality. I think she's just desperately trying to act tough."

That was why she couldn't control her emotions very well. Many people who've been bullied tended to have very meek and timid personalities, like Sakura. On the other hand, people who were confident, aggressive, and selfish—those who acted like Karuizawa—were typically the ones doing the bullying.

So Karuizawa's personality was a façade. A front. That's why she

needed people like Hirata and Machida. With them, she was able to get that assertive personality.

"Wait a minute. What was in it for you?" I asked. High school is one of the prime romantic times of a student's life. Hirata was popular with girls. If he pretended to go out with Karuizawa, he couldn't pursue a relationship with anyone else.

"What was in it for me? Karuizawa-san wasn't being bullied. That's all I needed."

It wasn't hypocrisy or love. He didn't have any selfish impulses.

"I know you're not convinced, but that's the reason I did it," he continued.

"I believe you. But is there some deeper reason as well?" I asked. Hirata wouldn't hesitate to save a friend, but he considered Manabe and the others friends, too. His concern for others was downright pathological.

Since he'd told me this much, Hirata probably felt like he had to see the story through. He bought a couple of drinks from the vending machine and handed one to me, which I gratefully accepted.

"Until my second year of junior high I was, for lack of a better word, a nobody. I didn't stand out at all."

"You, Hirata? I have a hard time imagining that."

"Well, I wouldn't say that I was completely invisible. I *did* have friends. I had this one friend ever since I was little, a guy named Sugimura-kun. We were in the same class together for six years, throughout elementary school. We were neighbors, too. We walked to and from school together every day." Hirata spoke like he was recalling some fleeting memory.

"When we started junior high, we were put into separate classes for the first time. At first, we kept going to school together just like we always had. Gradually, we walked together less and less. I started to only hang out with other guys from my new class. That story probably sounds normal enough, I suppose."

It *was* perfectly normal to make new friends in a new environment. Nothing odd about that.

"But you see, while I had my new friends, Sugimura-kun was getting bullied." Hirata squeezed the can he was holding. I understood where this was going. "Sugimura-kun sent me SOSs over and over. He'd show up with cuts on his face, or with bruises. But I cared more about hanging out with my friends, and never took him seriously. Sugimura-kun was always headstrong, quick to get into fights. I didn't

think too deeply about what was happening. But when we entered our second year, we reunited. By then, Sugimura-kun's spirit had shattered. His bright, cheerful personality was gone. That was only natural after being beaten down so much. He'd been punched and kicked so many times. They hounded him so much that he couldn't even go the bathroom; he ended up having accidents during class."

"So you saw that, and…"

"Yeah. I didn't do anything. I *couldn't*. I was afraid I'd become their next target. I was afraid that my new, fun life would be destroyed. So I pretended not to see Sugimura-kun, my oldest friend. I came up with convenient excuses for myself. I thought someday the bullies would just stop. Maybe once Sugimura-kun stopped going to school, they'd leave him alone. Or maybe someone else would step in to help him."

"So, what happened to Sugimura?"

"That day's burned into my memory, even now. After morning soccer practice, I returned to the classroom. When I got near the room, I saw that Sugimura-kun was already there, his face swollen. I decided to wait a bit before going in. To be honest, I felt uncomfortable. We'd been friends who played together ever since we were little, but right then, it felt like were complete strangers. I thought, 'If I get involved with him, I'll get bullied, too.' Perhaps Sugimura-kun saw how ugly my heart was. He didn't say a word, but it was almost like he was sending out a plea for help. That day, he jumped out of the classroom window," said Hirata.

"He *jumped*? Did he die?"

"He was declared brain dead. But even now, Sugimura-kun's parents believe he'll recover. They're waiting for him. That day was so surreal, I still wonder if it was a hallucination. I couldn't believe it. When Sugimura-kun jumped, I realized something. By selfishly focusing so much on my own desires, I helped drive a treasured friend to his death."

That incident had given birth to the man named Hirata Yousuke.

"I don't think Sugimura-kun can be saved, but I wanted to atone. I figure the only way for me to do that is to save others," Hirata said.

"I understand what you're feeling, but the world isn't that simple, right? At this very moment, there's someone being bullied somewhere. And they might try to take their own life, just like Sugimura-kun. You can't stop them."

"Of course I know that. I'm not a hero or anything. But I want to save the people close to me, at the very least. I must help them. That's

my penance for the sin I committed," he said.

"So what are you going to do, then? You want to save both Karuizawa and Manabe, but that's not possible."

"I understand that. It's probably why you're here with me right now," he answered.

Apparently, Hirata knew that he was abnormal himself. At any rate, he was a man on a mission.

"I never thought I'd ever tell this story to anyone. Nobody here knows the truth. That's why I chose this school," said Hirata. He tossed his empty juice can into the trash. "Will you and Horikita-san keep this confidential?" he asked.

"If you promise not to get yourself involved, I'm sure Horikita will stay silent," I answered.

"Then I'll believe in you two. Our philosophies are similar."

Hirata had pledged not to involve himself in the Karuizawa issue. From this point onward, Hirata would probably come to me for help whenever he was in trouble. I had successfully gained Hirata's cooperation, a power I'd always wanted. I'm sure he felt he'd gained something as well.

"Hirata. Since you have a large social network, I have a favor to ask." I handed Hirata a piece of paper. He read it and accepted my request without so much as a displeased look.

"Oh, Ayanokouji-kun. There is one more thing I've been hiding from you. I know the identity of the last VIP from Class D."

4.5

The next day, I decided to make a move, but rather unexpectedly, Sakura called for me. I decided to go talk to her.

"Looks like the test is over for the Cow group," I said.

"Yeah…" she replied.

I checked the email that Sakura, along with the other students, had received from the school.

"The test has now ended for the Cow group. Those in the Cow group are no longer required to participate any further. Please be careful not to disturb the other students."

It was exactly the same kind of email we got after the Monkey group finished. It was a brief message, devoid of context. Sakura looked at me with unease in her eyes.

"Have I done something wrong?" she asked.

"No, you haven't. This just means that someone in the Cow group reported to the school who they think the VIP is."

Leaving aside the time Kouenji got carried away and ended the test for his group, right now it seemed that people were betraying each other for two very different reasons. They were either betraying with certainty, or betraying because they felt impatient.

"Sakura, were you the VIP? Or was it someone else?"

Sakura quickly shook her head. "No, I'm not the VIP. But I'm not sure about Sudou-kun or, um, the others," she answered. She didn't seem to have any idea whatsoever.

"Don't overthink it. I don't know the identity of the VIP in my group, either."

"Okay. Thank you, Ayanokouji-kun. I'm happy you told me that."

"How are things with Class A? I heard rumors that none of them are participating in the discussions."

"Yeah, it's just like what the others have been saying. None of them have talked at all," said Sakura.

Katsuragi had been rather thorough in carrying out his plan. If that was true, then Class C had to have been the ones to trigger this new turn of events. But I was still left with doubts. Ryuuen claimed he understood the school's rules, and I had my own ideas. However, it was still impossible to know whether I was correct or not.

If I accidentally misread the rules, the class would self-destruct and take massive damage as a result. So far, the test hadn't ended for anyone other than the Cow group—proof that Ryuuen still didn't have a sure answer either. As we neared the end of this mysterious exam, many students were probably feeling perplexed.

"If there's anything else, please let me know. You can talk to me anytime," I told Sakura.

"Thank you, Ayanokouji-kun. See you later."

I bid farewell to Sakura, who waved her hands adorably. Then I headed toward the ship's lower levels. I proceeded down to the lowest level, where people didn't generally go. Although we were prohibited from going there, the area wasn't locked. The crew was probably using it. Although people could enter areas like the switchboard room if it was necessary, generally speaking, no one went in there.

There was no one to come if you called, no matter how loud you shouted. Including the regular entrance, there were only two ways in or out of the room. The other way was a door that led to the emergency staircase, but the workers didn't appear to use that. Judging from the dust, I knew that it hadn't been used in a long time. If I just kept an eye on the regular entrance, I could monitor the situation completely.

Another convenient thing was that phones had almost no reception here. Though you could occasionally get a little signal, sending emails or chatting was a pain in the neck, and it was next to impossible to make a call.

"All the pieces are in place," I muttered.

All I had to do was make sure everything happened in the proper order. First, I would contact Hirata, and then he would call Karuizawa. Since I wanted to postpone things a little bit, I'd probably need to have him call Karuizawa an hour or so earlier. I returned to the upper decks to make the call.

After our conversation last night, I thought Hirata might be especially on his guard. But I knew if Hirata called Karuizawa and said he wanted to speak with her alone, she'd respond. Karuizawa had said she was breaking up with Hirata, but she'd be the one to suffer if that happened. With Manabe and her friends on the attack, Karuizawa absolutely needed Hirata to protect her at school.

I got a message from Hirata. *I've promised to meet Karuizawa-san at 4:00 p.m. I'll send you Manabe-san's info*.

As expected, Hirata had fulfilled his role admirably. As a bonus, he even had Manabe's contact information, never mind that she was

from another class. If he hadn't known it, I would've had to risk asking Kushida. That saved me an extraordinary amount of trouble.

He sent me another message. *I have to tell you, I don't want to make Karuizawa-san sad.*

"You don't want to make her sad, huh?" If he knew what I was about to do, Hirata would've been furious. But that wasn't my problem. Even if she were to break here, I'd be fine so long as he didn't find out. This is a rather extreme example, but even if you committed murder, you couldn't be convicted without proof.

I quickly typed a message and hit send.

Hey, you got a minute?

The message was short and sweet, completely harmless. As a rule, chat apps are one account per phone. However, there was a way around that. By creating another primary SNS account, your device could hold another. Of course, not many students split their account into a main and a sub. The benefits of switching between accounts were marginal at best. However, by creating a new account, I was able to contact a third party without revealing my identity.

I needed to proceed delicately. If I didn't mess up, everything should be fine. Despite the fact that Manabe had received an anonymous message, she immediately responded.

Who is this?

Only natural she'd ask that question.

Is there anyone with you right now?

I'm alone, but who are you?

Don't show this to anyone. For your own sake.

Look, who are you?

Let's just say that I hate the same person you do.

Although I saw that she'd read my message, Manabe took some time to respond. *Do you have the wrong number?*

This isn't a mistake, Manabe-san. I want to talk about Karuizawa-san, the person you hate. I thought I might be able to talk to you about it.

I don't know what you're talking about. Please stop sending me messages.

She seemed wary, as if she imagined I might be an enemy. That was natural. First, I needed to win her trust.

I'm a classmate of hers, and it's been difficult dealing with her for a long time now. I want to get revenge on her, so I thought we could work

together. Since I'm in Class D with her, I can't go after Karuizawa-san directly. That's why I want your help.

I don't know what you're talking about. I'm going to ignore you.

Even though she was suspicious, she still hadn't cut off contact. That proved how much Karuizawa made her blood boil. That was why she wanted revenge on behalf of her friend, Rika. From the way Manabe had dragged Karuizawa into the emergency stairwell, her hatred was clear.

Rika-chan is still scared of Karuizawa-san, even now. Don't you want to help her? Your desire for revenge is written all over your face. But you couldn't do it even if you wanted to, right? Karuizawa-san is really cautious after what happened yesterday. I'm sure she won't leave Hirata-kun's or Machida-kun's side for a while. And she'll always be with other girls, so she won't be alone.

I don't need your help. I just need Karuizawa-san to talk to Rika. Then we'll know the truth.

I wonder if it'll be that simple, though? I can't imagine she'll admit that she lied. On the contrary, it would probably just hurt Rika-chan if Karuizawa-san says something awful. Oh, and that's not all. If Karuizawa-san's holding a grudge, she might bully Rika further.

What should I do? Are you saying there's a way?

Manabe's intense desire to settle things was evident.

If you and I work together, we can safely get our revenge.

What guarantee do I have? It feels like you're trying to lure me into a trap, and then you'll tattle to the school. This smells like a sub account.

If you think I'm trying to sell you out, Manabe-san, then go ahead and show this chat log to the teachers. You can only register accounts on school phones. I'm risking being identified by saying I want revenge on Karuizawa-san. I'm the one risking my neck here. Am I wrong?

I'm sure Manabe understood. Even a sub account wasn't perfectly safe. If I were exposed, I would obviously receive the harshest punishment.

So if I show this chat log to the school, what then? It'll be all over for you.

I don't think you're the kind of person to do that, Manabe-san. You have to show trust to be trusted.

I understand. I'll hear you out, at least.

After that, I repeated some familiar-sounding stories. Stuff about how much I hated Karuizawa. How I wanted to do something about it

but couldn't. How I'd heard about Manabe's confrontation with Karuizawa by chance, and that I'd tried to make contact. I played the victim thoroughly.

Once we returned to land, it would be difficult for me to contact Karuizawa directly. The school buildings and dorms were equipped with security cameras. Even if you tried to bring her into a private area, it was still highly likely that someone would spot you. This ship gave Manabe the perfect opportunity. I made her understand that revenge was only possible while they were here. I slowly but surely roused her anger.

So, what should I do?

Now that Manabe understood, I finally started to reveal my plan. *I'll call Karuizawa-san. Then, you take your time talking with her, and settle things.*

After I sent that message, I followed it up by sending a map of the ship's lowest level.

Since you can't get any reception down there, she can't call for help. No one comes down there.

I see, I see. So since you're her classmate, you can call Karuizawa-san?

I'd like you to tell me right now if you're going along with my plan. After I call Karuizawa-san, you can decide whether you'll take your revenge. There won't be any problems that way, right?

She took a long time to respond, the longest for any response thus far. Finally, I saw her response, and was sure that my plan would succeed. If my attempts to convince her via chat had failed, I had another plan prepared, just in case.

It would have been dangerous, but I would've made direct contact with Manabe in person. I had taken pictures when she was threatening Karuizawa in the emergency stairwell; I could've blackmailed her with those. However, the risks were great. I wanted to avoid drawing attention to myself as much as humanly possible.

"Now. Let's see what Manabe and her friends are capable of."

Sometimes a deep, heavy noise echoed throughout the dark level. Perhaps it was the sound of the ship changing course, or maybe it was because the ship had bumped into something. I wasn't entirely sure. But a lone girl came here, a place where all you could hear was the sound of machines.

"What's going on? I can't connect to… There's no signal."

There were still over ten minutes left before her arranged meeting with Hirata. Maybe she'd arrived a little early to calm herself down. After she realized that she couldn't use her phone, she put it back in her pocket and leaned against the wall, apparently bored. She closed her eyes and opened her mouth slightly, muttering something to herself.

With how quietly she was muttering, I couldn't hear her at all. What was she talking about? Unfortunately, Hirata wasn't going to hear it. Once four o'clock rolled around, the door opened. I heard the dull sound of it. Three girls from Class C stepped through—Manabe and her friends. Wait…there was one other person with them.

She seemed meek, rather like Sakura. This was probably Rika. "It's all right," said Manabe. Then she saw Karuizawa. Naturally, Karuizawa noticed them, too.

"Wh-what are you doing here?!" she asked, trembling.

The passageways inside the ship were narrow, so there weren't many escape routes. Running away would be difficult.

"I just happened to see you come in here, that's all. Well, I suppose this is the perfect opportunity. Let me introduce you. This is Rika. Do you remember her, Karuizawa-san?" asked Manabe.

Manabe grabbed Rika, who was hiding behind her, and pulled her forward. She and Karuizawa were now facing each other. Karuizawa averted her eyes, pretending like she didn't know her, but judging from her behavior it was obvious she remembered.

"Hey, Rika. Karuizawa-san was the one who shoved you, right?" asked Manabe.

"Yeah, she's the one," said Rika.

After hearing such a clear answer, Manabe smiled, looking happy as could be. Karuizawa, on the other hand, appeared increasingly anxious and confused. All I could do now was stay quiet and observe the miserable events that were about to unfold. Even if

Karuizawa were subjected to an even more wretched ordeal than I could imagine, I had no intention of saving her.

"Apologize to Rika," demanded Manabe.

"H-huh? Who's apologizing? I haven't done anything wrong," said Karuizawa.

"Still acting tough. You're a real piece of work, aren't you? But I think I understand now, more or less," snapped Manabe.

"Understand what?" asked Karuizawa.

"Your behavior. You're unusually fearful. Karuizawa-san, you were bullied, weren't you?"

"Wha—?!"

She had been trying to hide the truth, but her past had caught up with her.

"I hit the nail on the head, didn't I? I knew it. I could feel it right from the start," Manabe continued.

"No, you're wrong!" Karuizawa denied it, but her words were weak. Even if she'd been an excellent actress, there wasn't any point. It wasn't as though Manabe was highly perceptive or anything. She knew because I'd told her everything beforehand. I'd told her that Karuizawa had been cruelly bullied ever since childhood. That she harbored deep trauma.

"If you get down on your knees and beg right now, I might forgive you. How about it? I mean, you're good at groveling, right? Being on your knees?" Manabe mocked Karuizawa.

"N-no, I won't! I've never done that kind of thing before!" Karuizawa shouted.

Karuizawa tried to slip past Manabe, but Manabe snatched her long hair and pulled her back, slamming her into the wall. Manabe was assured that the stage had been set for her revenge, so I couldn't control her here. I'd only promised that she would "meet" with Karuizawa, after all.

She should have agonized over whether to use violence. However, when she finally had the chance to be alone with Karuizawa, she let go of all other concerns. Because her friends were expecting her to get back at Karuizawa, I couldn't imagine that this would end until Manabe had dished out a great deal of punishment. That's what I'd been aiming for, anyway.

It was like the Milgram experiment, a psychological study conducted in the 1960s. The test, also referred to as the Eichmann

experiment, had been conducted by two groups of people in an isolated facility. Members of these two groups played the role of either the teacher or the student. First, the person playing the role of teacher —the subject of the experiment—would administer a low electric shock to the student so that they would remember the pain and fear associated with it. The student would be separated from the teacher and placed on the other side of the glass. Then a device was installed on the student's side, one that would transmit the electric shock, while the switch to administer the shock was entrusted to the teacher.

At that point, the proctor overseeing the experiment instructed the teacher to give the student a series of problems. If the student made a mistake, the teacher was instructed to turn on the electric current. The teacher was told to increase the voltage every time the student answered incorrectly. The switch could administer shocks exceeding 450 volts, powerful enough to prove fatal. On the other hand, though, the shock administered for the first wrong question was only forty-five volts, which amounted to mild itching.

The subject could hear the student's voice, which meant every time a shock was administered, the teacher could hear the student's agonizing screams. However, unknown to the subject, the electric shock device installed on the student's side was a fake. The student only pretended to be electrocuted. The teacher could hear the student's suffering, though. At first, there wasn't much of a reaction. As the voltage increased, the agonizing screams of the student grew louder. Eventually, the student fell silent.

The subject, the teacher, wasn't threatened. They were only told they'd be rewarded and were free to do as they liked. In other words, even if the teacher asked to quit the test, they would be fine. Despite that, nearly 66% of subjects increased the voltage until they administered electric shocks powerful enough to kill someone. The experiment demonstrated that, depending on the circumstances, anyone was capable of incredible cruelty and brutality.

"Ow, ow! It hurts! Let me go!" screamed Karuizawa.

Karuizawa wept at having her hair pulled, and pleaded, but Manabe only laughed like she was enjoying it. Right now, they were on the lowest level of the ship, a closed environment. Manabe was the subject, and Karuizawa the student. I'd successfully set the stage for a situation like the Milgram experiment. Even though you could say the conditions weren't exactly the same, considering the relationship these two had cultivated, the situation was rather like the original experiment. Seeing Karuizawa suffer, especially after her proud behavior, probably felt great to them.

“Agh!” Karuizawa shouted.

“Whoa, Shiho. Don’t you think you’re hitting her a little too much? Wow, you’re harsh.”

Manabe continued to drive her knee into Karuizawa’s stomach. Of course, Manabe wasn’t used to hitting someone like that, so her movements were sluggish. It shouldn’t have hurt much. But Karuizawa’s pain was Manabe’s greatest reward.

Seemingly in a great mood, she invited Rika to join in. Rika had been standing some distance away, watching anxiously.

“Come on Rika. You give it a try, too,” urged Manabe.

“N-no. I’m okay,” answered Rika.

“We’re doing this for *your* sake, right? Come on, there’s no one around,” replied Manabe.

Rika wanted to refuse taking revenge, but that wasn’t allowed right now. If your friend coaxed and cajoled you to join in the fun, it’d be difficult to keep refusing. Rika knew that if Manabe’s anger were redirected at her, she could become the next victim.

“O-okay. I’ll try.”

There was the sound of a pathetically light slap. *Pap*.

“L-Like that?” asked Rika.

“No, no, that’s no good at all. You need to put more force into it, like this.”

Whap! The sound echoed through the room. Karuizawa looked like she was in pain after that hit. Rika slapped Karuizawa again and again, just as she was instructed. Her slaps gradually grew more forceful.

“S-s-s-stop it!” pleaded Karuizawa.

“Ha ha. This is fun! Ha ha!”

Well, maybe it was more appropriate to think of Rika as the subject of the Milgram experiment.

“Please, forgive me!” Karuizawa pleaded.

Seeing her like that must have felt euphoric for Manabe and the others. Rika started to punch and kick rather strongly, to the point where I couldn’t believe she’d ever been scared. Also, even though she left some marks on easy-to-spot places like Karuizawa’s cheeks, Rika focused on hitting places you wouldn’t be able to see normally, like under her uniform or beneath her hair.

Karuizawa collapsed in fear, tears streaming down her face. I

moved without making a sound. I quietly opened the door, taking care that Manabe and her friends wouldn't see. They would all continue to take out their frustrations on Karuizawa a little longer. I didn't particularly mind.

After all, if something has been thoroughly destroyed, it saves me time and effort when I need to build it back up. I quietly closed the door and was no longer able to hear Karuizawa's screams.

4.7

After I confirmed that Manabe and her friends were gone, I entered the room. Karuizawa should've heard the door open, but she continued to cower and cry on the ground. Perhaps she didn't notice me coming in because she was so overcome by fear. So this was how the leader of the girls, so arrogant and headstrong, really was?

Perhaps thanks to the advice I'd given to Manabe and her friends, Karuizawa's uniform and the parts of her body that you could normally see appeared undamaged. If her uniform had been ripped, or if they'd cut her hair, it would've been difficult for the Class C girls to go unpunished. While bullying is common, our school's unique setup made bullying much more difficult to get away with.

If anything might have been a cause for concern, it was her cheeks, reddened from being slapped over and over. The marks would fade by tomorrow, though.

"Karuizawa."

When I called her, she finally noticed me. She lifted her head. "Wh-why are…" she stammered.

I wasn't supposed to be here. She panicked at being seen like that, but couldn't just stop crying and act as though nothing had happened.

She would eventually stop crying. She would eventually calm down. If I left right now, what I wanted to happen wouldn't take place. I continued to wait quietly, without trying to talk to her. After some time passed, Karuizawa gradually stopped bawling, and she started to calm down.

If two people were alone together in a dark, closed room, a sort of natural intimacy occurred. Even if the people normally hated each other, the psychological distance between them would lessen.

"Have you calmed down a bit?"

"A little."

Karuizawa still didn't stand. She wiped the tears away with her uniform sleeve. I reached out to help her up, but she didn't move to take my hand.

"Where's Hirata-kun?" she asked.

"Sounds like he was supposed to meet you here. I would guess that a teacher called him away. I just happened to be with him when he mentioned you, so I came here in his place."

That explanation should have been enough to satisfy her and save me the trouble of further questions. There wasn't any need to tell her the truth right now. First, I needed to get her to relax, and then fill in the cracks of her heart.

"Why were you crying?" I asked.

"Manabe and her friends… I absolutely will not let them get away with that."

Karuizawa started trembling as she recalled what they'd done to her. Even if she didn't want to reveal this pathetic side of herself, the trauma was buried so deep that her pain wasn't easily hidden.

"You have to keep this a secret. If anyone finds out, I'll never forgive you," she warned me.

Karuizawa's weakness was that she couldn't stand being seen as a victim by the rest of the school. If people found out that Manabe and her friends had used violence, then the school would inevitably expose the details of what had happened and why. To protect her social standing, Karuizawa couldn't afford to let that happen. That was why she'd planned to use Hirata to stop Manabe and her friends.

"You know, you could get back at Manabe and the others. Since they're girls, even someone like you could win," she suggested to me.

"That's an insane request," I answered flatly.

"What, are you scared of getting even with Manabe and her friends? And you're supposed to be a guy," she chided.

"If you attack them, it'll all be over. You should know from what happened with Sudou that this isn't a simple matter. Don't you get it? An eye for an eye won't solve anything. Things will only get further out of hand. The school will carry out an investigation and conduct interviews. You don't want that, right, Karuizawa?"

"So you'll just lie down and take it?" she asked.

I knew how to respond, but decided to stay silent.

"But they would… They'll continue to do awful things to me," muttered Karuizawa.

She started shaking again. In truth, there was no guarantee that Manabe and her friends would stop. Karuizawa could find many ways to escape back at school, but she couldn't continue playing hide-and-seek with Manabe forever. Her classmates would eventually notice a change in Karuizawa's behavior.

Karuizawa desperately wanted to fix this situation. I'd been waiting for that desperation.

“It would be terrible if things went back to how they were back in the old days. I understand that you want to prevent it,” I told her.

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

Karuizawa should be putting things together by now. Even if it was clear how I knew that Manabe and her friends had bullied her, she should wonder how I knew about her past.

“I meant exactly what I said. You’ve managed to escape by getting into this prestigious school and rising through the ranks to reign supreme at the head of Class D. But in the end, you haven’t really changed at all. You’re still that bullied little girl.”

“Wh-who are you talking about?!” she shouted.

“You, Karuizawa.”

I grabbed her arm and forced her up.

“H-hey, what are you doing?!”

I pinned her up against the wall and forced her to look me in the eye. “Manabe tormented you just now, yes? She and her friends pulled your hair and slapped your face. They kicked you in the chest, in your stomach, didn’t they? That’s why you ended up like this: miserable, pathetic, crying on the ground.”

“Wha—”

Our eyes met. We stared as if we were being sucked into one another. Of course, there wasn’t any hint of love there. Only darkness.

“You were bullied ever since you were little. You were a victim throughout elementary school and junior high. You wanted to act tough so you could stop being bullied. Am I right?”

“D-did you hear this…from Hirata-kun?”

“Hirata is everyone’s ally, for better or worse. He’ll help you, like he’ll help anyone. Even if you got your position in Class D by pretending to be Hirata’s girlfriend, he won’t be of any use to you in situations like this. He isn’t a good enough host for a parasite like you.”

Karuizawa was much smarter than other people thought. She had taken care not to overdo it in the Rabbit group precisely because she understood Hirata’s neutral stance. That was probably why she was so reserved at first. However, as a display of her status, she’d started trouble with Rika, which led to this current predicament.

“What are you… Why are you doing this, huh?!”

“Why? It’s obvious, isn’t it? You need to understand your situation. Don’t you know who’s standing in front of you right now? It’s not Hirata; it’s me. I know everything. I know about your past. I know about your fake relationship with Hirata. I even know that Manabe and her friends tortured you to the point where you started bawling.”

I knew everything that Karuizawa Kei wanted to hide.

I had her heart in my hands. Right now, I would decide whether she lived or died.

“If you don’t do as I say, I can expose you,” I added.

Karuizawa understood better than anyone how terrifying that was. “D-don’t screw with me! Who the hell do you think you are?!” she shouted.

“Someone who knows the truth. Nothing more, nothing less.”

I moved in so close to her that our faces almost touched. When she turned her face away and tried to avert her eyes, I grabbed her chin and forced her to look at me. She wanted to look away, but with a man’s strength bearing down on her, she couldn’t move. She closed her eyes, as if trying to escape my gaze.

“What, what do you want with me?! You’re just after my body, aren’t you?” she screamed.

“Your body, huh? You know, that doesn’t sound too bad.”

I ran my fingertips across Karuizawa’s thighs. She felt so incredibly soft that I couldn’t even imagine that she was a person like me. Her skin was silky smooth. The feel of it was incredibly different from my own.

“Eek!”

She tried to escape my touch. I held her tighter and forced her to look straight at me. “Don’t run. If you try it again, I’ll tell everyone at school what I know about you.”

Those words were like a magic spell. She stiffened.

“You… Grr…” She sputtered.

Rage, panic, fear, despair: How many negative feelings had Karuizawa been carrying? She now realized that I was completely different from the meek person she knew from school. She probably found it terrifying.

“Spread your legs,” I commanded.

Karuizawa slowly opened her legs, tears streaming down her face as she did so. Even if she knew that she was about to be violated, she still wanted to protect her position. The pain she felt from her years of being bullied had won out. I placed my hand on my belt buckle and pretended to rattle it. Even so, Karuizawa didn’t run. She was trying to accept this. She looked at me with empty eyes.

There was no doubt about it. Karuizawa Kei had become a perfect tool for me. I didn’t actually care about her body; I just needed to threaten her to see how far she was willing to go, how much she would do. She probably understood that.

Revealing my true self to her was a big risk. If Karuizawa reported me to the school, I’d be in enormous trouble. However, she feared her past and losing her current social status more than anything else. That was why she’d go so far as to offer up her body if someone requested it, if it would protect her secret.

“I’ll never bow to you. I won’t be bullied by the likes of you. You just want to mess with me! You think you can do whatever you want, you pervert?!” she shouted.

Karuizawa roared with anger, as if it was welling up from deep within her heart.

“Well, whatever. It’s not like this is the first time someone’s used force against me. So. Did you know about *that,* too? How do you think I should act in an impossible situation?” she asked. Still trembling, she gave a thin smile and looked at me with an intense darkness in her

eyes.

"After a while, I gave up trying to resist. That's right; I was everyone's victim. I became cold, robotic. I could cry, scream, or thrash around, but it didn't matter. I couldn't do anything. All I could do was take it."

Karuizawa, as if accepting it all, lifted her skirt and touched her panties. I grabbed her slender arm and pushed her up against the wall.

"What happened to you?" I asked.

"What happened? All sorts of things. Everything and anything. They'd put tacks in my shoes or stuff my desk full of roadkill. When I went to the bathroom, I'd get splashed with dirty water. They wrote words like 'whore' on my uniform. They pulled my hair and punched and kicked me. Anything you could imagine, basically. I was bullied in every way. Countless times. What I've just told you was just a fraction of what I've experienced. Those were the 'gentler' ways I've been bullied, too. It makes me want to laugh. So, why aren't *you* laughing? Why don't you laugh at the pitiful loser who's been bullied all her life?"

Even after everything she'd suffered, she still got back up. She seemed ready to fight again. Her resilience had motivated her to enroll in this school. Still…the experiences she'd recounted weren't enough to explain everything.

"What else have you suffered?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"Have you told me the whole truth?"

I believed that something critical had shattered her spirit before this. There had to be some other reason behind her abnormal fearfulness, something that Karuizawa wanted to hide so much that it was worth giving up her body.

"What are you hiding?"

"Wh-what?"

Karuizawa turned her head from me and lowered her eyes to look down at her left side. I noticed that, of course. I reached over and touched that part of her body, over her uniform.

"S-stop!" she shouted.

Her shouts echoed within the enclosed walls of the room. I grabbed her uniform and pulled it up. There, on her beautiful skin, was an ugly scar. A deep scar, one that had been created by a sharp blade.

“This is it? This is your darkness?”

“U-ugh!”

This wasn’t the result of simple bullying. A serious scar like this had come from a life-threatening attack. Even though she was burdened with that horrible past, she remained tough. She got back on her feet.

Over the past few days, I’d keenly observed Karuizawa Kei. To protect herself, she forced people to become her allies. She protected her status, even if that meant being disliked.

“Despair comes in many forms. And you’ve experienced despair. Haven’t you?” I asked.

Karuizawa’s dark eyes met with mine. People who carry darkness within are attracted to one another. Slowly, they erode each other. Those who conceal a deep darkness will readily embrace the darkness of others.

“Wh-what are you…you…” she stammered.

If her past held her captive, then I had to forcefully free her from her shackles. Even if we weren’t close, I could feel the darkness from her, through her skin. Yes.

There were profoundly dark things left in this world that even Karuizawa didn’t yet know about.

“I promise you one thing. From now on, I will protect you from bullying. I will be much more reliable than Hirata or Machida,” I told her.

“Wait. You meant that *you* can stop Manabe and her friends?” she asked.

“Right now, you should understand what I’m saying. If the wind blows, a tiny flame goes out. However, a larger flame only grows bigger. It becomes so strong that it won’t go out, not even in the face of wild winds or pouring rain. You will help me, and I will help you. Kindness has nothing to do with it. Do you have any problems with this arrangement?”

“First things first. I’ll get rid of your anxieties for you,” I added.

I pulled out my phone.

“I have a way to stop Manabe and her friends.”

I showed her phone. On the screen was a photo of Karuizawa being bullied in the emergency stairway.

“That’s—” she began.

“If I send this picture to them, they won’t get carried away anymore. If they still decide to harass you, perhaps by spreading rumors, then I will step in and put a stop to it. With this.”

As far as Manabe and her friends were concerned, this incident should have been enough to satisfy them. If they got carried away and tried to hurt Karuizawa further, they would end up causing trouble for Ryuuen. Then they would be in jeopardy themselves. I let go of Karuizawa’s chin, and spoke in a flat, emotionless tone.

“All I want is for people to cooperate with me. I want you to assist me in the future, doing whatever I need.”

“What? Assist? What do you want me to do?”

“If things continue as they are, Class D will never overtake Class A. While the individual students within Class D certainly aren’t incapable, we lack a sense of unity. Our class is scattered. However, if you control the girls for me, the situation will gradually improve.”

Her social pull made her an even more valuable ally than Horikita.

“What are you trying to…”

Up until now, she’d only ever seen as me as a lowly, unobtrusive guy. Seeing my true self must’ve terrified her. But I was done explaining. Besides, the less I talked, the more terrifying I would appear. The less she would resist.

“Now, the first thing I need. We must guide our group to victory in this exam.”

“How am I supposed to help lead them to—”

“You can, because you’re… Right?”

Though I didn’t articulate the key word in that sentence, Karuizawa seemed to know what it was. She looked me in the eyes. The truth resonated deep within her, in her heart.

She tried to look puzzled, but that was just an act. After all, a parasite couldn’t live without a host. By finding a new host, Karuizawa only had one way to go on living: with me.

Chapter 5:
Each and Every Difference

We had reached the final day of the test. Unlike on the island, time passed quickly aboard this ship, surrounded by luxury. While Ryuuen focused on his united frontal assault, and Katsuragi continued ahead with his iron fortress strategy, Ichinose Honami from Class B had not come up with a countermeasure.

"Gah! I drew it again! Am I seriously this awful at Old Maid?" Ichinose spread out her remaining cards and collapsed into a heap before my eyes.

Even though this was our fifth discussion period, Ichinose had suggested playing cards once again. I would have questioned this approach, but no one in Class A entered into the conversation, so no one stopped her. A small group of people had simply determined that it was better to spend their time playing cards than doing nothing.

I was a little concerned that Manabe and her friends would try to confront Karuizawa, but it seemed like the picture I'd sent them had had the desired effect. They were being obedient. Karuizawa was acting normal, too.

If I were to look at things from Manabe's perspective, she had to be thinking that the person who sent her those mysterious messages via chat must have been either me or Yukimura, someone who was there during the incident in the emergency stairwell. Of course, when I sent her the picture, I added that I had received it from a classmate. She could imagine that someone had sent the picture to someone else, and it had circulated.

In the end, Manabe couldn't conclude with absolute certainty that it was me. That meant she and her friends wouldn't be able to make a move against me. There was no point in looking for whoever took those pictures.

"Is it okay to just sit here like this?" Yukimura sighed. He sat next to me, sounding disappointed and melancholy.

"You're being a downer today, Yukimura-kun. You ought to play with us and shake off that gloom and doom. Come on, let's have a rematch!" urged Ichinose.

"No thanks. I don't really feel like it. Really, is this okay, Ichinose-san? I mean, just doing this until the test ends. I thought you

were the one leading the group here.”

Ichinose stopped in the middle of shuffling the cards. “Isn’t that excuse too convenient, Yukimura-kun? If you seriously want to win this thing, don’t you think you should rely on yourself, rather than someone else?”

“Yeah. Good point,” he answered.

Yukimura understood full well that he couldn’t cope with having that responsibility thrust upon him. Despite that, he still wanted a way to change all this. If this test were measured solely on academic ability, then Yukimura would have been at the top of any group. However, being gifted academically didn’t make you a natural leader. It didn’t mean you could come up with novel ideas, either. Some things couldn’t be solved by memorizing words and formulae.

In the two tests we’d had over the summer vacation, everyone had experienced the bitter sense of their own powerlessness, even Horikita. I wondered if Ichinose and Machida felt irritated about being locked into a stalemate. However, that frustration can become your strength if it doesn’t break your spirit.

"Well, the test will be over after our next meeting. How do things look on your end, Ayanokouji-kun?"

I was having my last meeting with Horikita. The world outside was already cloaked in darkness. Carrying a conversation through chat would leave a traceable record. To avoid that, we'd met in person.

"There haven't been any significant changes. At this rate, it looks like the VIP is going to get away. How about you?"

I didn't think I could expect anything from Horikita, but then…

"I'll win," she replied flatly.

"You sure you haven't made a mistake?" I asked.

"I'm not sure who might be listening to us right now, so I won't go into detail. I'll just ask that you believe in me. Everything will be fine."

I'd already heard from Hirata that Kushida was the Dragon group's VIP. Of course, I imagined that Ryuuen and Kanzaki had done everything in their power to figure that out, but it appeared Horikita had overcome the odds. If she was this confident, there probably wasn't anything to worry about. Nothing left to do but wait for the 500,000 points to pour in later. You could call this a solid victory for us.

"Did you want to consult with me?" she asked.

"No need. Make whatever moves you like." Even if she told me about the Dragon group, I couldn't do much to assist her.

"So what did you want to talk about? I thought we both agreed to avoid unnecessary contact."

Perhaps she was…concerned about Ryuuen, who pursued her frantically? "You can't keep being scared of Ryuuen forever, you know," I said.

"Judging from how you phrased that, I'm guessing you can do something about it?"

It didn't seem like she expected much from me, since she appeared surprised when I nodded. "I've brought Hirata over to our side. I think we'll see a lot of cooperation from him."

"I don't particularly want that," she said.

"Well, that's fine. Besides, I'm not saying you have to get involved with Hirata. I'll handle him and maintain things. All you

need to do is keep up."

"I don't really like how freely you're operating in the shadows," she answered.

I'd thought she'd say something like that. "In that case, show your face when we discuss things. Even if you don't talk, you can follow along, right?"

"Well, I suppose so," she sighed. She sounded dissatisfied, but if I gave Horikita the option to participate, she wouldn't be able to argue with me. Besides, Hirata had a huge amount of pull in our class. After seeing his leadership skills in action, Horikita would likely come to understand.

"I'd like to introduce you to someone else later. Hirata, too. Make sure to keep some time open before they announce the results," I said.

"Okay, I *really* don't like this. I don't want you to just go ahead and recruit people as you see fit," she snapped.

"Think of it as compensation for putting yourself on the front lines. Anyway, this person will be useful to us."

"I have a general idea of what you're thinking, but… Well, fine. At any rate, let's meet back here after the test is over."

With that, I looked at the time. There was half an hour until the final discussion.

"I wonder how many traitors will come forward in this test," said Horikita.

"Who knows? I was surprised the test ended so suddenly for the Cow group, but I can't imagine we'll see a repeat of that. In the end, the likeliest outcome will be that the VIPs escape, and time will run out."

"Yes, I think so, too." Horikita briefly averted her eyes, the sort of unconscious gesture people made when they were worried about something.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing. It's just, well… Something about this test doesn't make sense. But there shouldn't be any mistakes. I definitely shouldn't lose," she replied.

Some of Horikita's anxiety was finally leaking out. Even if I offered her kind words, she'd tell me they weren't necessary, so I just kept quiet.

5.2

The Rabbit group was about to enter our sixth and final discussion period, still without any hope of making a breakthrough. I'd wanted to quietly and carefully gather my thoughts, so when Hirata and the others left our room, I headed to the meeting alone. Since there was still about half an hour until the discussion started, I assumed no one would be there yet. However, my expectations were dashed by someone's presence.

"She must have gotten here early, huh?" I asked out loud.

Ichinose slept soundly on the floor. Why should the mere sight of her tickle a man's heart in such a way? Ah, this was dangerous; it was really bad. Since she was lying on her side, I could see her plump thighs more clearly than usual.

Even though I knew I shouldn't, I couldn't help but look at her thighs, then her legs, then her face, and then her breasts. Then back to her thighs. While my adolescent desires got the best of me, something near the back of her head grabbed my attention. It was Ichinose's cell phone. She must've been using it just before she fell asleep.

Our assigned phones held quite a bit of information. Not only did they play a vital role in this test, but they also allowed you to confirm details, like how many points someone had. Of course, in order to confirm this, you needed an individual's ID and password. But in order to avoid the hassle of having to log in each and every time, some students just saved their information. In other words, if I snuck a peek at Ichinose's phone right now, it might be possible to find out all kinds of information. Like Ichinose's living situation, or the number of points she had. And I had confirmed earlier that Ichinose saved her ID and password on her device.

I approached cautiously and carefully, one step at a time.

"Ooh…ah…"

As I closed the distance between us, Ichinose stirred slightly, perhaps sensing some change in the air. But she fell asleep again, and her breathing relaxed. It seemed I hadn't woken her. I tried to get closer again.

"Mmm…"

What in the world was I doing? Even if this was an effective way for me to gather information, if anyone saw me, they'd think I was a pervert. What if Ichinose woke up? There'd be a huge misunderstanding. Even though it was okay for me to enter the room half an hour early, it *was* weird for me to wait around so openly while a girl slept.

Well, I didn't have anything to feel guilty about. Therefore, I would remain calm. Step by step, I drew closer to Ichinose.

"Ooh…um…" She muttered something unintelligible.

This wasn't good. Every time I moved, Ichinose began to wake up. As a test, I tried moving my foot back and forth on the same spot, without moving forward. If Ichinose showed any response, I'd assume she was an exceptionally light sleeper. They say many light sleepers are highly strung…

Creak, creak. I put my right foot forward, and then moved it back to its original position.

God, I'm pathetic.

Why did I have to sneak around like this? I'd definitely be branded a pervert if someone saw me right now. Realizing my actions were completely stupid, I gave up trying to sneak a peek at her phone, and instead moved away. I sat down on the other side of the room. From here, I couldn't glimpse the hidden place beyond her thighs. I didn't think I'd accidentally wake her, either.

Most importantly, it was still early. *Why in the world is she here?* I wondered.

About twenty minutes before the discussion period was supposed to begin, some cute-sounding music played throughout the room. It came from Ichinose's phone.

"Mmm…" she mumbled.

Ichinose, eyes still closed, grabbed her phone. She unlocked the screen and stopped the music, which apparently was her phone's alarm. Ichinose, still looking rather sleepy, started to sit up. Almost immediately, she noticed me.

I'd wondered if she would be disgusted by my presence, but she wasn't concerned in the slightest.

"Oh, good…*yawn*…to see you, Ayanokouji-kun. Sorry, did my alarm startle you?" she asked.

"Oh, no. Looks like you slept well."

"Ha ha ha, sorry about that. I just passed out; I slept like a log.

You're here early, though. Don't we have twenty minutes until the discussion?" she asked.

"I should be asking you the same thing. When did you get here?"

"An hour ago, I think. I wanted some peace and quiet. Since my friends are going in and out of my room, it's kinda noisy."

Apparently, this was the best place for a nap.

"Besides, I wanted to gather my thoughts," she added. Rather than looking refreshed by her nap, she seemed struck by sudden inspiration.

"Any results?" I asked.

"More or less."

She stood up. Then, for some reason, Ichinose walked over and sat down next to me. The two of us were alone in the room. The space between us was shrinking. Even though I couldn't hide my nervousness, Ichinose didn't seem to notice.

"There's still some time left until the discussion starts. Why don't we have a little chat? If it's not a bother, that is," she said.

"Oh no, it's not a bother. I don't mind."

"Okay. To tell you the truth, Ayanokouji-kun, I want to ask you something. I've asked all my classmates this question, including the boys. But I've been thinking about asking the other classes for a while now. I've just been kind of curious. Ayanokouji-kun, do you want to ascend to Class A?"

I'd been wondering what she would ask me, but the question was something surprisingly ordinary.

"Well, yeah. Of course I do. I've thought about getting up to Class A. No, wait…I guess it'd probably be more accurate to say that I *must* aim for Class A."

"Because of the guarantee of college or a career?" she asked.

In our school, students from Classes A through D competed against each other. The greatest privilege— being guaranteed to advance into any school or career path—was only limited to those in Class A. Many might think that sounded like a trick. The school pamphlet was rather ambiguous, so the details were murky.

"Nowadays, you can't just enter college or get a job that easily. Jobs, especially," I said.

"I think so, too. But don't you think placing too must trust in the system could be dangerous? There's something about that 99.9% percent they're not telling us. Something dangerous," Ichinose said.

Ichinose was referring to the “99.9 % college and job placement” rate that the school touted. She had a point about hidden pitfalls. Let’s say I wanted to be a professional baseball player, but had no experience playing the game. How would the school go about making me a pro? Even with their professional connections, they were limited. And even if you did play regularly in school, that didn’t guarantee you’d go pro. Even if you graduated from college or went on to graduate school, that didn’t guarantee you any sort of future. Really, only a fraction of people really managed to accomplish what they set out to achieve.

Statistically speaking, only one of every six students can achieve their dreams. At first, you might think that’s a high percentage, but the data’s ambiguous and the statistics are fuzzy. Being a professional baseball player isn’t the same thing as becoming a top-ranked player. If you gathered up everyone who qualified as a professional baseball player, including trainees, you’d have about 900 to 1,000 people. However, if the dream is to play as a regular on the team and take down your opponents on your first attempt, then maybe a hundred people max could do it. Finally, even if you secured a spot as a regular player, you must continue playing against your rivals, always a linchpin for the team.

In other words, no matter what you chose, it’s unlikely you’d achieve your dream. And it’s an extremely difficult thing to do. Many students just continue boring, tedious lives, with vague lip service paid to dreams as the years pass. To actually achieve a dream requires a lot of effort and luck.

“But this school… Well, it does have an incredible amount of influence, right? Most people who get anywhere in life succeed because someone influential helps them. Or are you not interested in that, Ichinose?”

“No, I’m not saying that. I want to graduate from Class A. I have a dream I want to make real,” she answered.

Even though she was smiling, her eyes were unwavering and serious.

“The school system’s all well and good, but if you can’t graduate from Class A, it’s a mark of failure. This school is all about ability, and if your abilities can’t carry you here, it’s unlikely you’ll ever be labeled an elite. Students are ranked based on perceived superiority or inferiority. Right now, between the two of us, Ayanokouji-kun, only one can achieve their dream. Ah, but then again, we could both lose out on our goals.”

Even though we were chatting like friends, only one of us could

win.

"You've heard there are exceptions to the rules, though."

"Hmm? You mean when someone manages to accumulate twenty million points?"

"Yeah. There hasn't been a single student in the school's history who's successfully pulled that off, but it is theoretically possible."

"Oh yeah, for sure. I suppose if we factor *that* in, it's possible for both of us to graduate from Class A," she replied.

"Be that as it may, whether or not you can really earn twenty million points is another problem. Even if you score well on the exams and save your points, it probably wouldn't be enough," I said.

Going by this test alone, it seemed possible to earn a great number of points, depending on how hard you worked, but we'd only had two such exams. From this point forward, it was possible that the number of such tests would be reduced, and the chances of being penalized could increase.

"That's true. Even if you're extremely economical, it's unlikely someone could manage to save even half that amount," Ichinose mused.

"Yeah. Class D's financial situation is especially awful. Even though Horikita's trying her hardest, the points from the island test have yet to be deposited. Actually, it's entirely possible we'll lose them in this test," I said. "Are you a thrifty person, Ichinose? You don't strike me as someone struggling to get by."

"Hmm, I wonder about that. Personally, I'll use points sometimes and save them sometimes, just like anyone else would. Even though I'm in Class B, I don't really have that many points saved." Ichinose responded to my question with ease. I didn't see any indication she was hiding something from me, but…

"Ayanokouji-kun."

"Hmm?"

Ichinose suddenly turned toward me. She looked me right in the face. "It seems like you saw it, a while back," she remarked.

I couldn't look away from her beautiful eyes. It was almost as if they were drawing me in. Ichinose was even cleverer than I'd imagined. I guess she'd seen right through my plans.

"Sorry. When you were using your phone earlier, I just happened to look at the screen. I was a little curious, so I was thinking of asking you about it."

“Ha ha, you don’t need to feel guilty or anything. It’s not like I’m blaming you. I mean, it certainly *is* a lot of points, right?”

Yeah, it was. Before the first semester had ended, Ichinose had already amassed an insane amount of points. Even if I saved all the class points that were doled out on the first of every month and didn’t spend a single one, I still wouldn’t have been able to save that many.

“But I can’t really give you any details. Sorry,” she added.

“No need to apologize.”

“Of course, if you *did* manage to obtain that information, Ayanokouji-kun, and even if you shared it with Horikita-san, you wouldn’t go blabbing to everyone, would you? I mean, even though you saw my phone, if someone else decided to ask about it, you wouldn’t tell, right?”

“I don’t plan on telling anyone else. Besides, I might’ve been mistaken. I won’t pry.”

Even if I *did* pry, it wasn’t like I’d get a satisfactory answer.

“Have you found a way to win this thing?” I asked.

“Hmm, I think so. At least, I think I’ve found a hint.” I didn’t think she would answer that honestly, but Ichinose sounded relaxed and confident. She seemed the type of person to act on her own initiative and not waste time.

“In that case, this contest will come down to a battle between A and B, I suppose.”

“We won’t know that until the end. My path to victory is—”

Right before she finished her thought, members of our group poured into the room, one after another. The Class A students were first to arrive, but they took their seats without giving us so much as a greeting.

“Oh, what’s this? You’re here already, Ayanokouji?”

“All alone with Ichinose-dono? My word, how suspicious. A clandestine rendezvous, wouldn’t you say?”

Yukimura and the Professor bombarded me with questions as they walked into the room together. I couldn’t especially tell if they were impatient or depressed, but it seemed they’d given up on winning. On the other hand, the Class B students seemed rather relaxed.

“This is the end, huh? So, have you found any hints?” asked Hamaguchi. He spoke gently to me as we waited for the final discussion to begin.

“To be honest, I have no idea. We haven’t really been able to talk, which means we haven’t been able to engage,” I said.

That was my official answer, but I’d already executed the strategy I’d been plotting since the test began. My plan involved the phones we all received from the school. I had switched the VIP’s phones as a means of camouflage. Kushida was the Dragon group’s VIP, but what if Kushida and Horikita switched phones? If someone spied on her phone, they’d suspect that Horikita was the VIP.

Then, if a traitor submitted Horikita’s name as their answer, they’d be making a mistake. We would win.

“Good evening. Nice to see you all,” Ichinose said warmly.

She was smiling, just like always. I set the trap immediately. We didn’t know who else had a hidden agenda, after all. I’d been waiting for Ichinose to talk, and decided to cut in before she spoke up again.

“Um, excuse me. If everyone’s okay with it—”

“I have something I’d like to ask—”

Both Hamaguchi and I started talking at the same time.

“Oh, sorry. Go ahead, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“Oh, no. You can go first. I don’t mind,” I said.

How annoying. Well, this didn’t get in the way of my plan, but any unexpected trouble could make things unstable. I decided to let Hamaguchi speak first. I’d chime in after thinking things through. Then, Hamaguchi shattered my plans in an unexpected way.

“For the past three days, I’ve been thinking of how we could achieve Outcome #1,” he said.

Hamaguchi launched into an explanation of his plan which, surprisingly, was quite like mine.

“There is a way for everyone here to achieve Outcome #1,” he continued.

A faint glimmer of hope shone in everyone’s eyes. “Is that really true, Hamaguchi?”

“Yes. I came up with this idea after listening to everyone here, including Ichinose-san and Machida-kun.”

“I can’t believe it. There’s no way we can arrive at Outcome #1 without discussion,” Machida huffed.

“Let’s hear him out first. Hamaguchi-kun isn’t the sort to speak without thinking,” offered Ichinose.

“I’m going to show you all my phone. Of course, the school sent

us all an email. I think you all understand what I'm getting at? Because we're prohibited from tampering with or misrepresenting the emails we've received in any way, there's no way to deceive one another. That's why the answer is simple. We show each other our emails, and then we find out who the VIP is. That's how we'll discover the truth."

"This is dumb. Why would anyone show their phone just because you told us to? Someone could betray us all the moment we show our emails. No one would do this," answered Machida flatly.

It was a hopeless plan. Naturally, Machida-kun was flabbergasted.

"It's certainly true that if the VIP knows they could be betrayed, they wouldn't show their phone. However, from the perspective of someone who isn't the VIP, there's no risk in exposing your identity. The test will be over soon. If we don't make a move, we lose our chance of winning. Suppose there's a class working together to cover for the VIP. It's true that none of them would show their phones. But this way, it's possible to narrow down the list of candidates."

"Even if you find out the VIP's identity or the class they belong to, the moment someone decides to betray you, it's over. The problem hasn't been resolved. Or are you suggesting that the first to betray us wins?" countered Machida.

Through Hamaguchi's strategy, it was possible to successfully weed out the VIP. But that was it. In the end, people weren't going to play nice.

"In that case, please be quiet and just watch. If you don't participate, Machida-kun, it'll still be fine," Hamaguchi answered.

Hamaguchi showed everyone the email that he'd received.

"I agree with Hamaguchi-kun. I'll show mine, too."

After Hamaguchi showed his phone, Beppu from Class B followed suit. This didn't seem like some spur-of-the-moment idea. This seemed like a strategy Ichinose had come up with. Strangely enough, her plan was exactly the same as mine. However, I didn't know how far she'd thought this through, or what her moves were. If she simply believed everyone would go along with this, then it was quite simply reckless.

"I think it's a surprisingly good strategy. I don't have any objections," said Ichinose.

Smiling, Ichinose reached for her cell phone in her skirt's left pocket. "I've been agonizing over this for a long time now, but after

hearing Hamaguchi's plan, I get it."

Ichinose pulled out her phone. I decided to step in and interrupt before she could execute her strategy.

"You're serious about this, huh? Well, if you're all going to bet on that, I think I'll join in, too," I said.

Before Ichinose could show everyone the contents of her email, I took out my own phone and offered it up. But it wasn't actually my phone; I'd switched it with someone else's.

"Ayanokouji-kun…are you okay with this?" Ichinose asked.

"Sure. After hearing Hamaguchi out, I honestly don't think we have another option. I'm really bad at communicating, so all I can do is show you the truth," I answered.

"Wait, Ayanokouji. There's no way this kind of strategy is going to work," said Yukimura.

He tried to stop me, but I showed everyone the email on my phone. Everyone saw that I wasn't the VIP. An incredible amount of water was building behind this unseen dam. If even the tiniest hole opened up, the dam would collapse, and we'd be left with a muddy stream of water. My actions opened that hole.

“Yeah. Okay. So you’re not the VIP, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“Okay. I’ll show mine, too.”

Among the large number of people still scoffing at Hamaguchi’s strategy, a lone girl agreed. It was the person I’d least expected: Ibuki Mio.

“Are you nuts? We don’t get anything out of this!” shouted Manabe.

However, Ibuki’s response was well-reasoned. “Anyone who isn’t the VIP or who’s not in the same class as a VIP gains nothing if things keep going like this. Class B understands that. If we sit around, we won’t catch up to the classes above us. That’s why they’re showing everyone their phones. I agree with their idea,” she answered.

“That’s—”

“Or maybe *you’re* the VIP,” said Ibuki.

Ibuki didn’t talk to Manabe as if she were an ally. She spoke like addressing an enemy.

“N-no. I…”

“In that case, show everyone your phone.”

Ibuki’s words threatened her classmates. Manabe and her friends, as if accepting Ibuki’s order, showed everyone their phones. The hunt for the VIP had begun. Karuizawa took out her phone, which had a strap attached, and handed it over.

“Wait. It’s not just Ayanokouji-kun? *You’re* going along with this, Karuizawa? You agree with this?” Yukimura was puzzled.

“I’m doing this for my own sake. I want those private points,” said Karuizawa.

Her email said she wasn’t the VIP. Karuizawa was in the clear.

“Um, so what should I do?” muttered the Professor.

“Think for yourself, Sotomura. This is voluntary.”

“Uh…well, I don’t want to get wrapped up in this, so I’ll just get it over with.”

The Professor, seeing how the tide had turned, reached for his phone. Yukimura grabbed his arm and stopped him. “Do you really think that showing everyone your phone is the right move?” he asked.

“You know, you’ve been really jumpy. You’re not the VIP, are you?” Ibuki asked.

Yukimura’s expression stiffened.

“Whoa, seriously?”

“Yukimura isn’t the VIP. I heard as much earlier,” I said.

However, some of the students burst out laughing.

“You expect us to believe that? You could be lying.” Manabe cast a doubting look over at Yukimura.

If I continued denying that he was the VIP, it would only invite further suspicion. But I couldn’t make my move yet. That’s because Yukimura was…

“It’s too early to draw any conclusions. Yukimura-kun has a point,” Ichinose said. Once again, she reached into her pocket and took out her phone. “I got a little caught up and missed my chance earlier, but I’ll show you now,” she said.

Ichinose proved that she was not the VIP.

“Wait, Ichinose. Earlier, you said you’d been keeping quiet about something until now?” Machida clearly hadn’t forgotten.

“Ah, that? I had the same thing Hamaguchi said on my mind earlier, and wanted to talk about it. That’s it.”

“The same thing?”

“As Class B’s representative, I’m a little jealous that Hamaguchi-kun beat me to the punch.”

By now, everyone except the Class A students and Yukimura had proven themselves to not be the VIP.

“…”

Everyone understood the meaning behind Yukimura’s long silence. Machida and the other Class A students stared at him inquisitively.

“Fine. I’ll show you. All I have to do is show you, right?” he muttered. Yukimura, no longer able to deal with the pressure, pulled out his phone. “Before I do so, I want you to promise me one thing,” he said.

“Promise? What do you mean, Yukimura-kun?”

“I don’t want anyone here to turn traitor. Especially you, Class A. I want you to take out your phones and put them in front of you. That goes for everybody. Everyone, put your phones where I can see them,” he demanded.

He directed his statement at Machida, who responded with a snort. “What are you talking about?” he asked.

“Exactly what I said. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“Well, fine. Whatever. If you want to see my phone, here.”

The Class A students, who’d been sitting some distance away, calmly came over and placed their phones on the table. After they did that, Yukimura made his move, looking downcast. He pulled his phone out and turned it on. He entered the six-digit password, and logged in. Yukimura opened the school’s email and lifted it up so we all could see.

“I’m sorry for lying to you, Ayanokouji,” he muttered.

Class D was the most surprised by the revelation.

“I’m the VIP.”

A different email from everyone else’s was displayed on the screen.

“Wha— Y-Yukimura-dono, *you’re* the VIP?!” the Professor stammered. He looked astonished, as if he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. This basically meant we’d given up the 500,000 points that Class D had gained. However, I’d exchanged phones with Yukimura in secret.

“If I’d known things would turn out like this, I would’ve talked from the start…”

Karuizawa looked genuinely shocked and uneasy. To look at her and the Professor, you’d think the two of them could never have imagined that Yukimura was the VIP. Machida stood and peered at Yukimura’s phone.

“The email seems authentic. All of the other personal emails are Yukimura’s, so there’s no room for error.”

Machida, after checking Yukimura’s private email and chat logs, confirmed the truth. He still appeared doubtful, and Ichinose tried to explain the situation calmly.

“There’s no way it could be fake. After all, the school explained the rules, right? Copying and transferring the email is forbidden. As long as the email was sent from the school’s email address, there’s a 0% chance it’s a fake.”

She was right. Creating false information was strictly prohibited. If you broke that rule, expulsion awaited you. Therefore, everything laid out here had to be the truth.

“So that means it’s definitely Yukimura-kun.”

Manabe nodded. The important thing here was the process that had led to Yukimura’s revelation. Whether the person holding that phone was actually the true owner of that phone was irrelevant. In

other words, judging whether or not that phone belonged to Yukimura was a surprisingly difficult task. The idea that someone had switched phones wasn't outside the realm of possibility.

However, showing everyone the process of entering the six-digit password and unlocking the phone was a different story entirely. There was no way a student could know someone else's phone password. Everyone unconsciously acknowledged that Yukimura must be the owner of the phone. This wasn't the result of deduction, but rather of preconceived notions.

"I'm sorry, Yukimura-kun. This happened because I came up with this idea at the very last minute," I muttered.

"No, it's okay. It's probably for the best. I thought I could lie my way out of this, but I was wrong. I'm sure you, Sotomura, and Karuizawa would agree this was for the best," said Yukimura.

Everyone now thought of him as the sort of person who wanted to secure points for only himself.

"Well, now everyone knows the answer. It's me," Yukimura said.

If we all cleared the test together, everyone in our group would receive 500,000 points. Outcome #1, which at first had seemed impossible to achieve, now appeared to be in our grasp. Ichinose nodded, and pleaded with Class A more strongly than before.

"Please. Cooperate with us. Don't let Yukimura-kun's courage go to waste. I don't want you to betray us."

"We've been acting on Katsuragi-san's instructions from the very beginning. We won't do anything on our own," answered Machida.

He said that, but the group would disperse right before the test ended. During that thirty-minute window of time, we had to trust not only in our own classmates, but in students from other classes.

"I want to believe… No, I *do* believe in everyone." Yukimura begged fervently.

He begged everyone, from every class. I wondered if the students who'd spent so much time together over these past few days had started to form bonds of friendship. I wondered if they would accept Yukimura's wishes, and if everyone would work together.

No, they wouldn't. I was sure of that.

Someone would turn traitor. I had no doubt.

And if that happened, then the ones who had switched phones—Class D—would take the victory.

Yukimura must have believed that, too. I imagined that he was

practically dying from holding back his laughter. However, his joy disappeared when the phone started vibrating with an incoming call. Panicking, Yukimura lunged forward to snatch the phone, but dropped it. By sheer coincidence, the phone fell face-up.

Since the phone was on silent, the table shook as it continued to vibrate. The caller ID said “Ichinose.” Ichinose, holding her phone to her ear, looked at Yukimura and me.

“What are you doing, Ichinose? There’s no point in calling Yukimura’s phone at a time like this,” said Machida, looking suspicious.

Only Yukimura and I understood what was going on. She quietly hung up the phone.

“The school said that altering or copying the emails is forbidden, that’s true. That’s why the email we saw was the real thing. However, there’s no rule saying that you can’t trick people with the phone itself. Do you understand what I’m getting at?”

Ichinose picked up the phone and handed it to me.

“The person this phone belongs to, the real VIP…that’s you, isn’t it? Ayanokouji-kun? I called you just now, not Yukimura-kun.”

I’d exchanged numbers with Ichinose some time ago. And even in the event she hadn’t known it, she would’ve done her research just to be safe.

“B-but isn’t that odd? Yukimura unlocked the phone right in front of us. I checked his private email history just to be sure,” said Machida.

“That was all fake. He could’ve easily gotten the password ahead of time by simply asking Ayanokouji-kun. Besides, it’s possible to replicate call history, email, apps, and so on, though it would take a bit of effort,” said Ichinose.

Machida’s face flashed a different, angry color. He snatched the phone out of my hands.

“It’s not easy for people to lie like that, especially when the goal is within reach. In those last moments, either through negligence or nervousness, they’ll leave some kind of opening. Yukimura-kun lied, and his gestures and behavior seemed different from the way he normally acts.”

Ichinose had completely seen through my attempts at subterfuge. Yukimura turned pale as she spoke. It was doubtful that he even heard her.

“We’ve been thinking about this for a while now, too. If the VIP

was in your class, one option would be to swap phones. You could mislead people by showing off the password to unlock the phone."

Apparently, Ichinose and the others had come up with the same strategy that I had.

"But you see, there's a weak point to that strategy: a phone number. Even if you perfectly duplicate everything from call history to apps, you can't change the number. Hamaguchi and I had tried swapping SIM cards once to see what would happen, but the SIM cards are locked to their designated phones. If you'd swapped them, I wouldn't have been able to call you. It doesn't matter who switches with whom: Once I hear the phone ring, I can find the owner. If I couldn't do that, I wouldn't have proposed this idea in the first place," said Ichinose.

Ichinose and Hamaguchi had been two steps ahead. They'd probably orchestrated everything, agreeing that Hamaguchi should be the one to broach the topic. In one second, the truth had come to light.

"You did everything almost perfectly. But you didn't anticipate that our SIM cards are locked to specific devices, did you?" Ichinose gloated.

An announcement came through the speakers, telling us we had five minutes left before the discussion period was over. We were told to break in the next five minutes and return to our rooms.

"Damn it!" shouted Yukimura.

"Too bad, Yukimura. It was a surprisingly good try, though," said Machida. He and the others laughed, furthering the mockery.

They glanced over at me, the one also complicit in this plan. Yukimura was still visibly upset and shaking, and so was the rest of Class C. Classes C and A appeared shocked. I'm sure they had many questions, but the rules prohibited us from talking any further.

"Anyway, we've confirmed that Ayanokouji-kun is the VIP. Machida-kun, promise me that we'll aim for Outcome #1, and no one will betray anyone else," urged Ichinose.

"Yes, of course. You can trust me. Let's go," Machida said.

The three Class A students left the room right away, before anyone else.

"There's so much to gain by working together. That's why we'll never turn traitor. That's why I want you in Class C to do the same. Please, just bear with it for thirty minutes," Ichinose pleaded.

Manabe and the others nodded and left the room. Yukimura

looked at the phone I was clutching.

“I was wrong to go along with your plan. This sucks,” he fumed.

One by one, everyone left the room, leaving me alone with Ichinose.

“Now all we can do is to trust everyone,” she said.

“Yeah. Guess so,” I answered.

“You’re really calm, Ayanokouji-kun. Aren’t you worried?”

“Not especially. I can’t do anything but believe, anyway. I’m heading to my room.”

There was nothing to gain by staying here.

“Hey, wait a sec.”

Ichinose placed a hand on my shoulder. In that instant, I felt the tension between us.

“Who came up with the idea of swapping phones?” she asked.

“Horikita, of course.”

“I see. Please tell Horikita-san something for me. Tell her that her plan was a huge success.”

“A huge success? Don’t you mean a crushing defeat? We failed, hard. You saw through everything.”

“Ha ha ha. You didn’t expect us to have come up with the same plan, did you?”

“I’m sorry. Sorry for trying to deceive you like that, especially after I agreed to be your ally. Are you angry?”

“Of course not. We went ahead with our own plan without telling you, so we’re even.”

“I see. If you mean it, I’m sure Horikita will be relieved.” I grabbed my phone and headed for the exit.

“W-wait, wait a second. We still haven’t gotten to the critical part yet,” she said.

“The critical part?”

“Come on. You’re surprisingly bad at dealing with people, Ayanokouji-kun. It’s true that the SIM cards are locked to their respective devices. But there *is* a way to release that lock. Isn’t that right? I checked with Hoshinomiya-sensei to confirm. She said that with enough points, you can unlock the device right away,” said Ichinose.

In that instant, I felt a faint electric current run down my spine.

“After a falsehood comes to light, most people will take the answer that comes after it to be the truth. Yukimura-kun was determined not to be the VIP, even after he showed everyone how he unlocked your phone using the password. The moment that lie was revealed, the truth that you’re the VIP came to the surface. The SIM card was the deciding factor. No one would suspect anyone else as the VIP now. But that was the trap. I said the idea of swapping phones was an imperfect strategy, but that was a lie. That’s because swapping phones is extremely effective. Of course, it must be a double-layered

trap in order to work. In that case, the truth will remain in the darkness. There wouldn't be any way for anyone to determine, with 100% accuracy, the real VIP's identity."

Ichinose had seen through my plan. She'd seen through the plan behind the plan. She realized the truth I'd kept hidden even from Yukimura. First, she knew I was not the VIP, but that I'd approached Yukimura under the pretense of being exactly that. As proof, I used the real VIP's phone to contact him. But the real target—the real VIP and the owner of that phone—was Karuizawa. She'd hidden that fact very well. The only person she'd secretly told was Hirata. Hirata kept that from both me and Yukimura at first. That's why he pretended not to know who the VIP was when we spoke about it. However, after I learned about his and Karuizawa's pasts, Hirata told me the truth. Then, after I used Manabe to bully Karuizawa, I took the opportunity to swap our phones.

Of course, I replicated the email and call history, just as I did with Yukimura. Naturally, I then used my points to do a SIM lock release. Doing so wasn't illegal and could be done free of charge at any major retailer. We may have been on a ship at sea, but I'd been positive that the school would have something prepared to replace or repair our phones should they be damaged. That's why, while using Karuizawa's phone, I was able to transfer over my number as well.

Then, I swapped that phone with Yukimura's. Of course, I had told him it was my phone, and he believed me. If my deception were revealed, he'd be extremely angry.

A simple person would have never noticed that Yukimura and I switched phones. A clever person would have noticed the swap and accused me of being the VIP. But they never would have come to the conclusion that Karuizawa was the real VIP.

"If the VIP wasn't in Class D, what would you have done?" asked Ichinose.

"The same as you. I would've tried to find out who the VIP was, borrowed that person's phone, and had another one ready. Then, I'd step forward and claim to be the VIP myself."

If the real VIP then came forward to point out the lie, the writing would be on the wall. Simply believing that Ichinose was the VIP meant that the test would end with the traitor making a mistake. In the latter situation, Class B would be awarded no points, and the gap would either decrease or increase between the classes.

"So I've been found out, huh?"

Ichinose started pulling phones from both pockets. One belonged

to the VIP from a Class B student's other group, and the other was a phone from a different student who, most likely, wasn't a VIP.

"This is just my prediction, but based on how today's discussion went…"

Ichinose quickly typed a short message on her own phone.

"The real VIP is Karuizawa Kei-san. Am I right?"

She showed me her phone. That was the betrayal message she was going to send to the school. However, before anything could happen, both my phone and Ichinose's rang at the same time.

"The test has now ended for the Rabbit group. Please wait for the results announcement."

"Ahh, I guess someone turned traitor, huh? I wonder, was it Class A or Class C?"

"Why did you think it was Karuizawa?" I asked.

"The same reason as Yukimura-kun. She's been behaving unusually. She normally doesn't seem to care much about you, Ayanokouji-kun, but she kept looking over at you, and her face tightened. But there's still the possibility that she isn't the VIP, so I couldn't have sent that email."

Apparently, Ichinose had completely seen through my plan.

"Why didn't you say anything? At the very least, you could have exposed my lie," I said.

Ichinose smiled. The smile she wore now was perhaps the most genuine I had ever seen from her. "That's obvious. If either Class A or Class C makes a mistake, that's a win for us. From the very beginning, I never intended to clear Outcome #1, or to turn traitor and get Outcome #3. The moment I knew the VIP wasn't in Class B, I knew I would let another class betray us. I think the traitor was probably from Class A," she said.

"Machida?"

"No, no. Morishige-kun. He's a member of Sakayanagi's faction. I doubt he'd just quietly go along with Katsuragi's plan. He probably figured that, if anything, it was better for him to betray the group and take the points. Don't you think?"

Ichinose laughed and turned her back to me.

"Ayanokouji-kun, you're amazing. You know that? Our conversation just now proves how cunning you really are, doesn't it?"

"You ought to praise Horikita. She just gave me directions, that's all."

It seemed I needed to re-evaluate Ichinose Honami. She'd managed to thoroughly avoid risks while devising a strategy that led her to victory.

"Well, I'll be leaving then. It would be bad if we broke the rules, wouldn't you say?"

However, the moment Ichinose said that, both of our phones played a unique sound. It played four times, quickly.

"Wh-what does this mean?" asked Ichinose.

She seemed completely shocked as she slowly looked from her phone's screen over to me.

5.3

Our ship floated on the dark, lonely sea. As we got closer to 11:00, more and more people began to gather. The café, which had been completely silent, started to fill up with people. Eventually, the place was packed. I secured four seats well ahead of time. A lone girl approached me.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," she said.

Karuizawa Kei approached me rather meekly. Something about her expression seemed different.

"Sorry for calling you so late."

"No, it's okay."

Since I didn't really have anything to talk to her about, I silently gazed at the nighttime scenery. However, Karuizawa looked as if she had wanted to ask me something. I glanced at her.

"Ah, um. I was just wondering if everything really went okay," she said.

"Don't worry. I'm positive that one of the guys from Class A sent the school an email with my name," I answered.

I'd had one more piece of insurance up my sleeve, besides the double phone swap. But because I'd laid my plans well, there was likely nothing to worry about.

"How can you say that for sure?" she asked.

"I'm guessing you're talking about that piece of paper you gave me. Right, Ayanokouji-kun?" Hirata's approach from behind made Karuizawa jump in shock. Well, that was understandable. After all, Karuizawa had screamed at him and said they were breaking up the other day.

"Excellent work on this test, both of you. May I sit?" he asked.

"Sure."

Karuizawa shifted in her seat, clearly uncomfortable. She looked away, but didn't show any sign that she would refuse him. It was 10:55 p.m. In just five more minutes, an email should be sent to all the students.

"It's just about time. Is Horikita-san still not here? Shouldn't we contact her?" asked Hirata.

"She's the type to come at the very last second. We have another four minutes," I said.

“Ah, looks like she’s here,” said Hirata.

Apparently, Horikita had arrived earlier than I’d expected.

“Ahh. When I see you people, I can’t help but sigh,” muttered Horikita.

“You’re finally here. Hey, who’s that behind you?” I asked.

“Ignore him. Think of him as a ghost that attached itself to my back,” Horikita said flatly.

“Aw, come on. Don’t say that, Horikita. I just thought you might be nervous during the test, so I was worried about you. That’s why I came to check on you.”

Sudou Ken. I hadn’t seen him for several days. He stood so close to Horikita that they were practically attached.

“You’re in the way. Get lost,” she spat.

“H-hey, don’t say that. I gave this test everything I had, you know.”

“In that case, do you believe you’ll end up with good results?”

“I was just one step behind, that’s all. Looks like someone else sent the email before me,” he muttered.

Horikita stopped paying any attention to his lame excuses and sat down in the vacant seat. Sudou quickly went to grab a chair from a nearby table.

“You’re in the way,” Horikita grumbled.

“Come on. It’s fine, isn’t it? I’m just going to listen. You wouldn’t cut out a classmate, right?”

This was a rather unusual group of people. Sudou didn’t seem to show interest in listening to anyone else.

“Anyway, about the chain of emails we received earlier,” Horikita began.

“Yeah. I was hung up on that, too,” I said.

We were talking about what’d happened two hours earlier. Just as I was about to part ways with Ichinose, we’d received four emails at almost the exact same time, in rapid succession. They’d informed us about the end of the test for several groups. The test had ended for the Rat, Horse, Rooster, and Pig groups. They’d all had traitors.

“Minami-kun was the Horse group VIP, right?” asked Horikita.

“Yeah. Someone discovered his identity,” I reasoned.

“Did one of us send an email for the other groups?” asked

Horikita.

She was anxious. If you guessed incorrectly, the penalties were high.

“I was a little apprehensive about that, so I went around and asked people in the individual groups earlier. None of the guys said they turned traitor,” Hirata answered.

Hopefully, they hadn’t lied to him. I thought we could trust them to a certain degree.

“Is Yamauchi okay?” I asked.

“Ah, he’s probably okay. Yamauchi-kun was in the Rooster group. It seems he *did* try sending an email but agonized over it for too long. The test ended before he could actually send it,” said Horikita.

“I don’t know who it was, but betraying the group before he could was a fine move,” I said.

Horikita had predicted that if Yamauchi sent the email, he most likely would’ve gotten the answer wrong. She was probably correct. He might consider himself a reckless, daring guy, but the moment he hesitated to send that email, it was all over for him. He wasn’t the cocksure guy he imagined himself to be.

“But I don’t know about the girls,” Horikita said.

“I’ve already checked. No one sent an email,” said Karuizawa without hesitation. As controller of the Class D girls, she could be as certain as Hirata of her information.

“I see,” answered Horikita flatly. Of course, since Horikita did not have the necessary social pull, she had no choice but to accept what she was told.

“Still, I wonder why only a small group of people were given explanations for this exam, in the end?” muttered Hirata, as if he still had lingering doubts that he couldn’t quite shake.

“This exam was all about testing our thinking. It’s not like every single question would have an answer,” said Horikita.

Maybe we’d only truly grasp everything after seeing through all the meaningless bluffs. The truth hid among those many doubts.

“What I’m worried about is that those four emails came in at almost the exact same time. The school said we had a timeframe of thirty minutes at the end of the test to betray someone, but all the emails came within one to two seconds of each other,” she said.

“Isn’t that just a coincidence?” asked Sudou. Apparently, from

Sudou's perspective, everything was a coincidence.

"When Kouenji-kun sent the email to betray his group, the school responded without delay. If you think about how fast it was, it must have been automated," Horikita began.

"So it's likely that all of the emails were sent together. In other words, the betrayal emails all came from one class." Hirata finished her thought.

That was it. I couldn't think of any other reason.

"They might have sent the emails at the exact same time as a way of showing off their supremacy," Hirata added.

"Yeah. And there's only one person I can imagine who'd do such a thing." said Horikita.

Horikita and Hirata had a natural rapport. I was grateful they were able to do this without me having to jump in. Meeting in this particular café, a place we'd used so many times before, had been a deliberate move on my part.

"So. You're all here after all, huh?"

It was so I could invite a particular sixth guest to join us.

"Ryuuen!"

Sudou, after noticing Ryuuen, stood up as if to threaten him, but Ryuuen didn't pay any mind. He simply grabbed a vacant chair, forcefully slamming it next to Horikita before taking a seat.

"I thought I'd enjoy finding out the results with you all. Thanks *so* much for gathering in such an easy-to-find place," he said mockingly.

"Yes. I chose this space because even an idiot like you would be able to find it quite easily. You should be grateful," answered Horikita.

"Anyway, Suzune, you've got a rather large group with you. Have you grown more sociable?" muttered Ryuuen, looking out at the other four people gathered around the table and ignoring Sudou completely.

"I disliked your persistent harassment. I was talking to them about it," said Horikita flatly.

"Don't you hang all over Horikita!" roared Sudou.

"Sudou-kun, be quiet," Horikita snapped.

"Oh," he muttered dejectedly. Sudou obediently sank back into his chair. He was surprisingly docile.

“I didn’t think you actually had any friends,” Ryuuen teased.

This was a defensive strategy I’d devised specifically to deal with Ryuuen. By increasing the number of people in Horikita’s social circle, I had successfully set up a dummy. With more people to keep an eye on, he would be unable to catch everything. He’d become negligent.

“The results will be announced any minute now. Are you expecting any results?” he asked.

“More or less. You look rather relaxed,” Horikita said.

“Heh. I wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t. Looks like the same crowd as the last time,” replied Ryuuen.

“And I remember that the last time they announced results, you were acting all high and mighty. But then you lost big,” Sudou chided, pointing a finger at Ryuuen and laughing.

Horikita, as if agreeing with Sudou, gave Ryuuen a disgusted look.

“Stop it, Suzune. You know if you get carried away now, you’ll just be embarrassed later. I already know our group’s VIP,” said Ryuuen.

Whether he was lying or not, Horikita wasn’t shaken in the least. She was convinced that she wouldn’t lose to Ryuuen. “I’m quite glad to hear that. I look forward to the results,” she replied with confidence.

“There’s no need to wait for the announcement. Want me to tell you who the Dragon group VIP is?” he asked.

“I’m sorry, but I’m hearing the irritating whine of a loser. The test has already ended, and no one in the Dragon group has turned traitor. That can only mean one thing,” she answered. The exam had ended without Ryuuen figuring out that Kushida was the VIP.

“If you could only understand the depth of my mercy, you’d be moved. So moved that you’ll get wet between your thighs.” Ryuuen laughed, as though such vulgar language was funny.

“All right, tell me then. Who is the Dragon group VIP?” asked Horikita.

Ryuuen, as if he’d been waiting for her to ask, covered his smiling face with his hand. He peered at us through the gaps in his fingers, like some kind of beast in a cage. He looked ready to tear out his prey’s throat.

“Kushida Kikyou.”

“Huh?” Horikita, who had been unconcerned until that point,

cried out and stiffened. She'd been confident that he'd never get it right. Hirata, also in the Dragon group, was flabbergasted as well.

"I'm sorry, but I've known Kushida was the VIP since the second day of the test," Ryuuen said.

"You're joking, right? If that's true, you would have turned traitor and sent an email. But the test didn't end like that. That must mean you realized that fact after the exam had ended. There's no other way. Am I wrong?" asked Horikita.

"I just felt so sorry for you. You were oh-so-incredibly confident in your victory that you looked down on others. You were desperate to get your stories straight, assuming no one would get the answer right. That's why I went along with it until the end."

"How did you figure it out?" asked Hirata. His question contained a mixture of curiosity and fear. He must've been curious both because he'd so carefully protected Kushida, and because Ryuuen hadn't betrayed anyone.

"Unfortunately, the answer to that… Well, it involves you, Suzune," answered Ryuuen.

"Me?" she asked, dumbfounded. Horikita must have been desperately trying to remain calm while replaying the test in her head. When, where, and how had he gotten the answer?

"I figured it out because of your body. The movements of your eyes and mouth. Your breathing. Your behavior. Your tone. Everything about you told me that you were lying," continued Ryuuen in an eerie voice.

"Stop with the jokes!"

"Jokes? If it's a joke, then how do I know the truth?"

"That's… I'm sure you could've just heard it from someone else," Horikita stammered.

"I understand how you feel. You don't want to admit that you're the most incompetent person in the group. But don't beat yourself up, Suzune. You merely chose the wrong opponent. Besides, this exam was supposed to be pure chaos. At any rate, Class A is in for an especially rude awakening. Relax."

"What? What did you do?" asked Horikita.

"You'll understand soon enough."

Apparently, Ryuuen had played a major part in the four betrayal emails. Once the clock struck eleven, we received notifications at the exact same time. All of us, save Ryuuen, checked the results:

Rat: Outcome #3. The traitor answered correctly.

Cow: Outcome #4. The traitor answered incorrectly.

Tiger: Outcome #2. The VIP's identity was not discovered.

Rabbit: Outcome #4. The traitor answered incorrectly.

Dragon: Outcome #1. The entire group answered correctly at the end of the test.

Snake: Outcome #2. The VIP's identity was not discovered.

Horse: Outcome #3. The traitor answered correctly.

Sheep: Outcome #2. The VIP's identity was not discovered.

Monkey: Outcome #3. The traitor answered correctly.

Rooster: Outcome #3. The traitor answered correctly.

Dog: Outcome #2. The VIP's identity was not discovered.

Pig: Outcome 3. #The traitor answered correctly.

Based on those results, the increase or decrease in class and private points are as follows. "Cl" and "Pr" are used to denote "class points" and "private points," respectively.

Class A: Minus 200 cl; Plus 2 Million pr

Class B: No Change cl; Plus 2.5 Million pr

Class C: Plus 150 cl; Plus 5.5 Million pr

Class D: Plus 50 cl; Plus 3 Million pr

"Class C…came out on top," muttered Horikita.

Everyone looked stunned by the results.

"Isn't this great, Suzune? Thanks to your blunder, the Dragon group managed to clear this test with Outcome #1. Because of that, all the classes should receive a boost in points," Ryuuen crowed. He clapped his hands and wore a satisfied grin. "If you beg for it, I'll tell you the answer. How about it?" he asked.

"Who would—" Horikita started to snap, but quickly shut her mouth.

"Ooh, that look you have. It's pretty sexy."

Ryuuen took out his phone and placed it on the table. On the screen was a list, and on that list were the names of the VIPs from Class A in the Rat, Rooster, and Pig groups.

"I made some adjustments and arrived at the root of the test. Then, I just focused on the Class A students," he said.

Ryuuen had managed to clear the test without targeting Classes

B or D at all. No one should have been able to pull off something like that, but Ryuuen did.

"I'm sorry to tell you, Suzune, but you're my next target. I'm going after you with everything I've got. I won't stop until I tear you to shreds, both in mind and body."

Horikita, unable to attempt a comeback, simply kept staring at the results. After obtaining such a huge number of points, Class C had gained an overwhelming lead. Looking over the results, it became clear that Kouenji saved our asses, even though we thought he'd been screwing around. If he hadn't done what he did, this victory would've belonged exclusively to Class C. Of course, Kouenji's actions had ended up causing stray bullets to go flying at other VIPs.

"I'm looking forward to the second semester," said Ryuuen.

Ryuuen, his payback for the island administered in full, walked away with satisfaction. The rest of us weren't exactly in a celebratory mood. If someone saw the stern looks on our faces, they'd imagine we'd suffered a crushing defeat.

"I understand that Ryuuen-kun managed to discover the VIPs in Class A, sure, but I'm not convinced he has some kind of preternatural talent. Still, how did Dragon Group end up with that result?" asked Hirata.

No one answered, perhaps because no one could figure it out.

"I mean, it's not really a difficult problem. If you just put your mind to it, it's relatively simple," I told everyone.

"What do you mean?"

"Putting aside how Ryuuen found out the VIPs' identities, all he had to do was tell everyone 'Kushida is the VIP' before the end of the test, right? Of course, no one would believe what someone like Ryuuen says. Especially a group of such intelligent, gifted people. However, the final half hour was different. Even if you answered incorrectly, there wasn't any risk to class points. As such, even someone who'd been playing defensively like Katsuragi could vote, right? If there was even a 1% chance that Kushida was really the VIP, then they would've gotten Outcome #1, which was the most convenient for everyone involved."

If he'd just planted the seed earlier, it would've been extremely simple. But something like that would've normally been impossible. It was a tightrope act; something that couldn't have happened unless every single person trusted that Kushida was the answer. Was it even possible? As I thought about it, I still had doubts. I never would've imagined he could succeed. How had he gained everyone else's—

excluding Class D, of course—trust? I was genuinely curious.

Perhaps if he had absolute proof?

“Horikita. I think that we might be in trouble,” I said. There was no quick fix to our problem. Depending on how things went, Class D might be stuck with these obstacles for the long haul.

“By trouble, you mean Ryuuen-kun? It’s true he did very well in this test, but there’s no guarantee he’ll be dangerous in the future. Your group won their test, after all. Didn’t they?” she asked.

“You’ve got a point. I’m probably overthinking things. Don’t worry.”

Perhaps my feelings were nothing more than a premonition. But what if they came true? These might be our first faltering steps toward despair. But I also felt some alien emotion growing inside of me. It was something like excitement.

Postscript

Hmm, hmm. (Flipping through the postscript at the end of Volume 3 to verify.) I see, I see.

Apparently, Past Me said something to the effect of "I'll finish my manuscript soon," when he worked on Volume 3. Well, that's no good. (The following has been redacted.)

Hey, hello! This is Kinugasa. Wow, it's been four months. Anyway, here in Volume 4, we have the second round of special tests. Because the classes had to work together this time, this was a battle of cooperation. Each class made their own moves based on their own personalities, and you could see them divided into light and dark groups. I remember my school days, when I had to hang out with students from other classes. I was uncomfortable because I couldn't really act like myself around them. People who can just talk to anyone really are amazing, aren't they?

Anyway, in the next book, the story heads back to the school. The second semester is about to begin. It's possible that a certain figure from Ayanokouji Kiyotaka's past will make an appearance in Volume 5. Also, it won't just involve his classmates. Even the upperclassmen will get involved. Jeez, how many more people are there going to be, anyway? The characters just keep on coming. There's like an endless supply of them. (I haven't learned my lesson, I guess.)

Anyway, if I'm able to pull it off before the next book, I want to release a side story. The story was supposed to be something serious and dramatic, but sometimes I just want to let off some steam and be silly. It'll be rather short, though I might structure it kind of like this story.

Ah, and lastly… Well, this is a private matter, but I got engaged the other day. Sorry, Shunsaku-san! (Some deep meaning there.)

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